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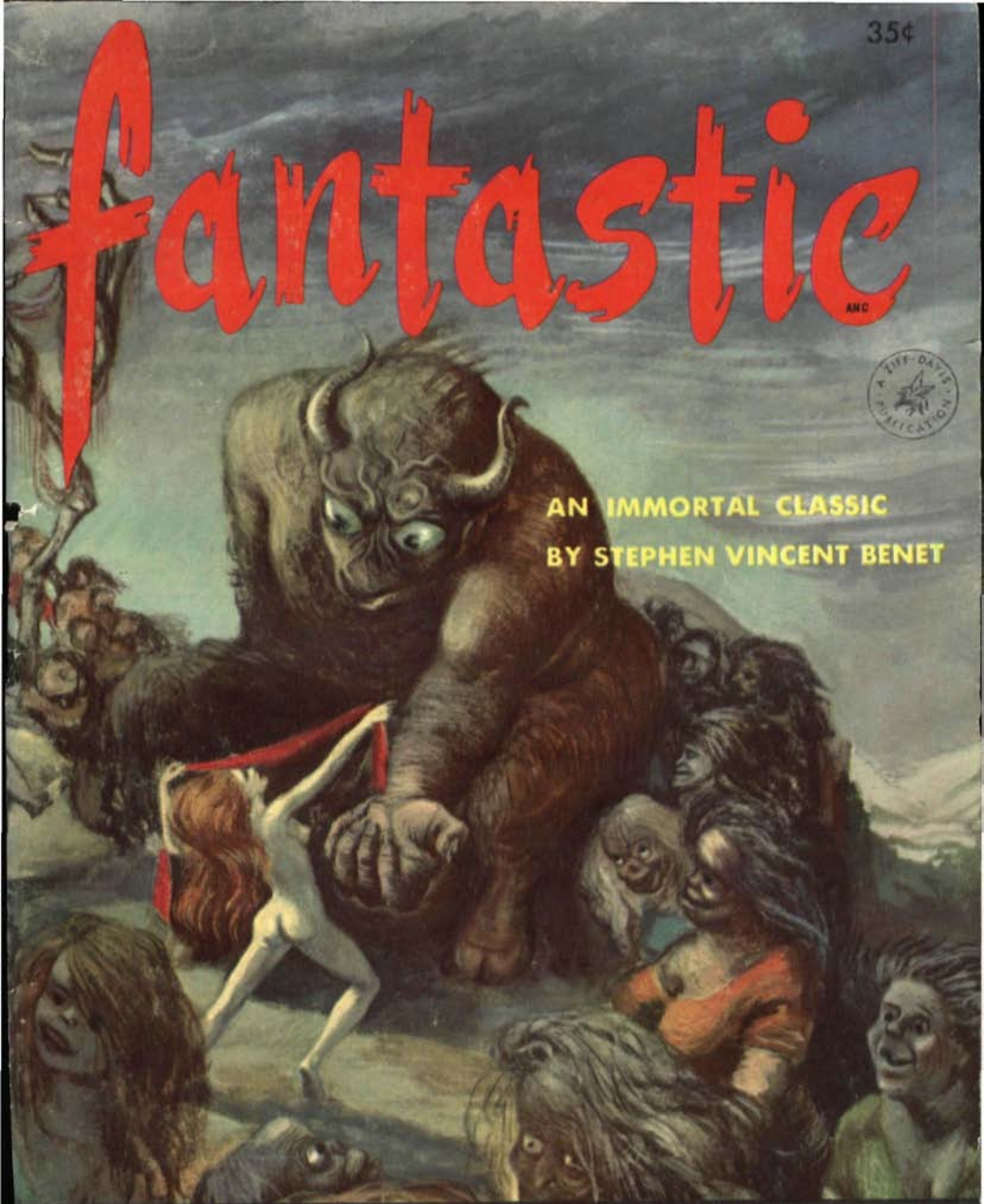

AN IMMORTAL CLASSIC
BY STEPHEN VINCENT BENET

NEW FANTASY FICTION AT ITS FINEST!

William P. McGivern • Isaac Asimov • Alfred Bester
John Wyndham • Esther Carlson

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THEY WRITE..

WILLIAM P. McGIVERN:

I've been a free-lance writer since 1939 with only two breaks—a stretch in the army and a stint as a reporter on the *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*. Had previously met a very cute gal named Maureen and changed her last name from Daly to McGivern. After the newspaper chore, we spent a couple of years in Europe where I wrote mystery novels about New York and Philadelphia. Now we're back in Gotham and I'm doing a mystery with a Rome background. In Europe, I discovered how far *Fantastic Adventures* travels. Found a copy on a tiny Spanish island called Ibiza (pop. 200) and was told by the clerk it had been left by a vacationing priest.

MENDOZA:

Have had a varied career. Obtained my early education in France and began drawing at a very early age. What with tight money situation in the family, I worked at a variety of jobs between the ages of fourteen and eighteen. Jobs included mining coal in England and running a joy wheel at an English fair. Finally into the army for the first World War. After taking an art course on a post-war grant, took out painting in earnest, but with time out for a few roles as an actor in a repertory company. Hard luck came with the 2nd World War, putting me to work superintending a West Side club in London. Finally got clear. No more trouble.

ALFRED BESTOR:

I was born in New York City. I weighed 10 pounds and was 20 inches tall. In 39 years I've gained 200 pounds and 53 inches. Also, in the interim, I learned to read and write and eat with a fork. My wife and I live in an ancient brownstone in NYC filled with bell-pulls, speaking tubes, and ghosts of the mauve decade elite. Give any Central Park cab horse his head and he'll trot straight to our door, proving the joint must have jumped in Diamond Jim Brady's day. The *Roller Coaster* was written last summer on the beach at Fire Island. I wrote it in the sand with a sea shell while three blondes in Bikini suits did the proof reading. Fun.

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JINN AND TONIC

By WILLIAM P. McGIVERN

As Gabriel Heater used to say in his more ebullient moments, there's good news tonight! Once more we present Reggie Van Alexander, whose mind hits consistently on all one cylinder; Sari, who loves him madly but with a vague wonder that he should have happened to her; Million Dollar Monroe; and Guinivere, the feminine fulminate whose left hip alone could have routed four Roman legions. This time these fugitives from a Wodehouse yarn combine with a little man who lives in a bottle, to bring you the laugh treat of the month!

William P. McGivern, whose taut tales of crime and detection appear in novels, magazines and motion pictures, here gives you the lighter side of his typewriter. You'll love every minute of it!

REGGIE VAN ALEXANDER was in an expansive mood as he swung homeward through the cool, starlit darkness of an April's evening. There was a bounce to his long, lissom frame, a musing smile on his pleasant but undeniably vacant features. He felt so good, in fact, that he started to worry about it; he wasn't given to introspection, or thought of any kind, as a rule, but tonight he attempted to isolate the factors contributing to his well-being.

First there had been a topping dinner at the club, and then a fruity conversation with J. Phillpott Forbes, the club crank, who believed that the only solution of the country's ills lay in the immediate importation of

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the Indian caste system to America. That had been a heady session, since no one at the club normally bothered to talk to Reggie, but it wasn't enough to explain this state of top-holeness.

No, there was something else.

Reggie frowned. He didn't like mysteries, particularly when their solution was locked away in the vaults of his own mind. Frankly, Reggie didn't trust his mind. He didn't even like it very much. Minds were supposed to be alert and helpful. Other chaps discussed theirs in terms of pride and affection. "It just popped into my mind," they'd say, as if their minds were vigilant outfielders in some cerebral baseball game. But Reggie's mind was all butterfingers; things slipped away from it, or through it, or else were lost forever in one of its countless drafty pigeon-holes. Reggie suspected that his mind didn't care about these errors. It was a sloppy mind, without pride or backbone. Frankly, it was a rotter.

But then, as Reggie was crossing a particularly nasty intersection, full of charging cars and snorting taxis, his mind rather marvellously decided to play the game. It tossed up an idea for him to see, and instantly Reggie's frown faded and he began to smile.

Ah, of course! Sari, the girl he loved, was returning to the city tomorrow morning, and they had planned a breakfast reunion at his apartment.

"Good old mind," Reggie said, forgetting his previous unkind thoughts, and he strolled on at an even bouncier pace. His spirits floated in contentment. Tonight there'd been J. Phillpott Forbes talking to him man-to-man about Brahmins and Untouchables, whatever in Heaven *they* were, and tomorrow he'd see Sari, the girl he loved. This coincidence of rum things was enough to make a chap believe in Providence.

It was at this precise moment that the ragged little man charged out from a side-street and collided with Reggie's limber, elegantly clad form.

"Blimey, it's Providence," the ragged little man gasped, as his eyes took in Reggie's lean foolish face, and the pearl studs glowing in his dress shirt.

"Dash it, my thought exactly," Reggie said. "I was strolling along, mulling it over, and I thought —"

"Look, Your Lordship, you wouldn't like to help a bloke out and do yourself a good turn in the bargain, eh?"

The question, consisting of two parts and phrased in the negative, was about as clear to Reggie as it would have been in Latin. He nodded, then shook his head, congratulating himself on having met the issue shrewdly.

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The ragged little man, whose eyes kept darting away from, and back to, Reggie's pearl studs, saw only the nod.

"It's like this, Governor," he said. "I was crossing from London last week, and one of our blokes took sick and died."

"Scurvy, eh?" Reggie sympathized.

"Warn't. It was his insides got swollen and poisoned 'im. But no mind. 'E was an Eyegyptian, a sneaky bloke, and 'e had something with 'im 'e set great store by. 'Twas this," the little man said, removing a small green bottle from his pocket. "This 'ere bottle it was. When 'e died we pinched the bottle from his bunk, we being 'is friends, you see, and sold it to the 'ighest bidder. My mate, Billy, bought it for a 'undred dollars, American, 'e got drunk in port and lost the bloomin' bottle, you might say. It was found by your 'umble servant, Cheerful Jack Leeds."

"I say, what luck!" Reggie, whose concept of sailors stemmed from a reading of *Treasure Island*, had a thrilling vision of rogues with black eye patches fighting and snarling over this bottle.

"I'm 'ard up now meself, Your Lordship, and the bottle, which is Lord knows 'ow old and valuable, must go with all my other worldly possessions. I'm sacrificing it for ten dollars. Take it, feel it. Pretty, ain't it?"

Reggie accepted the bottle, cannily keeping a burgeoning excitement from showing in his face. For this was obviously a great bargain. Sold once for a hundred dollars, and now going for ten. It was the sort of thing that seldom happened to him; Sari, for instance, insisted rather despairingly that his fiscal sense could be tucked away in the eye of a newt. Reggie didn't know how large a newt's eyes were, but he suspected gloomily that they were pretty small.

Now was a chance to prove her wrong.

The bottle and a ten-dollar bill changed hands. Reggie continued on homeward, bursting with triumph, and Cheerful Jack Leeds proceeded to the nearest bar. He had Reggie's tenner in one grimy hand, and a pearl stud from Reggie's shirt in the other.

Reggie's man, Clive, opened the door for him and took his coat. Clive, a tall elegant man with smooth pink cheeks and the forehead of a thinker, noticed the missing shirt stud, but decided not to mention it; it would be simpler to replace it with an imitation one than to inquire into the circumstances of its loss. In his years with Reggie, Clive had learned one important lesson: keep conversation out of the abstract; pin it down to reality. This he proceeded to do now in refer-

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ence to still another matter.

"Sir, the Brewster Shop delivered your new evening clothes."

"Ah, top hole. You unpacked them? You approve?"

"Sir, I sent them back."

"Now dash it all." Reggie patted Clive's shoulder. "The old brain going soft, eh? I say! Look at it this way. Man buys dinner clothes. Store pops them around. Valet sends them back. Ridiculous, eh?"

"Remember the patrimony, sir."

Reggie felt the words as if they were a shot-filled sock applied to the base of his skull. He sighed. Once, a long time ago it seemed, he and Clive had enjoyed man-to-man talks about dinner clothes, wines and vacation spots. Now, whenever they began chewing something over, they came down on this sticky business of the patrimony. It was a point Reggie didn't thoroughly understand, but he knew it was a prickly one. It went like this, he decided, making a manful effort to think it through. He, Reggie, had been left pots of money. Good! Then he, Reggie, had met a man named Million-Dollar Monroe, who sold stocks and bonds. After a largish evening, Reggie had bought a lot of these stocks and bonds, and then he had learned, later this was, that they were all worthless. He knew he had been bilked in some fashion, of course; Clive, and his lawyers, and his brokers, had finally drummed that into his head. There was little room for rancor in Reggie's childish soul, but what space existed was reserved for Million-Dollar Monroe. Reggie didn't miss the money, however, so much as he did the old cheerful chats he'd once enjoyed with Clive. Now all their exchanges had a funereal tinge. . . .

Reggie decided not to tell Clive about the bottle. He had a misty presentiment that Clive would fail to appreciate the cunning of the transaction. In a gloomy mood he said good night and toddled off to his bedroom. . . .

Reggie placed the bottle on his bureau and studied it carefully as he undid his eye. Some of his doubts evaporated. It was a smashing bottle, really first-rate. He held it to the light and saw that it was empty. Well, he thought defensively, one could hardly expect it to be filled with Napoleon brandy.

He turned the bottle this way and that, and then, after considerable effort, pulled out the stout cork stopper. Immediately a thick oily vapor poured from the throat of the bottle and settled to the floor. Somewhere in a far distance Reggie heard a wind that might have been born in the drumming of mighty wings. The drapes in the room flattened against the windows.

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Reggie brightened.

Wait until Sari saw this, he thought.

The ropy gray vapor solidified on the floor and rose slowly in a tubular column to a height of nearly five feet. Then the smoke ceased to pour from the bottle. The column thickened, darkened, and gradually assumed a human shape.

Reggie shook his head admiringly. "I say," he said softly, "This is *good.*"

"Miscreant, you speak from ignorance," a deep voice answered.

Reggie looked around, scratching his head. *Somebody* had said something, but there was no one in sight. He glanced back and saw that the column of smoke had disappeared, and that a short, plump man had taken its place. This chap, whose skin was a rich chocolate in color, and whose eyes were deep and mournful, wore a full-length white robe which was decorated with an indecent number of softly glowing pearls.

"What ho!" Reggie murmured, pleased by this development.

"Know that I am Erodin and that I shall destroy you," the short plump man said, squaring his shoulders.

"In Heaven's name, why?" Reggie said. He began unbuttoning his shirt. "I haven't done —"

"Silence," the man commanded. "I am a Jinn of Balai land. I was imprisoned in that bottle twelve thousand years ago. It was something about the Chief Jinn's harem, but I —" The little man coughed slightly. "That isn't important now. It was all a lie, in any case. In the first five thousand years of my imprisonment, I decided to grant the gift of eternal life to my rescuer. In the next five thousand years, I grew bitter. I decided I would grant my rescuer only sufficient precious jewels to make him the peer of any prince in the world. I —"

"That seems damned generous," Reggie said, suddenly liking this chap. The bloke obviously had decent instincts.

"Please don't interrupt," the little man said sternly. "My bitterness grew as the years passed, and finally I decided that I would destroy my rescuer without mercy."

Reggie's mind skittered back to something that had occurred a few moments before. It was something deuced queer. Finally he got it. "I say," he cried, "were you *inside* that bottle?"

"Yes, wretch. For twelve thousand years."

"Well, a chap gets attached to a place and just doesn't want to stir. I had an apartment in the Sixties once and I rotted there, year after year, just because I felt cozy about it. You know —"

"Silence," the little man cried. "Reflect on your fate. I am an Oriental. I am excruciatingly Ori-

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ental, you might say, and your punishment must necessarily be excruciatingly Oriental. You will be untouched, but those you love, those who make life supportable, will know the bitter quality of my anger."

Reggie began to take off his trousers. The chap was hipped on this revenge business, which was too bad. That was the trouble with spending too much time in one place, Reggie reflected philosophically. A chap's horizons narrowed.

"You don't seem too concerned," the Jinn said, eyeing Reggie dubiously.

"But I am," Reggie said. He said it firmly and solidly, because he saw no point in hurting the chap's feelings.

"Very well, until tomorrow I will leave you," the Jinn said, and with a cynical salute, stepped back one pace into the bottle and disappeared.

Reggie shrugged and went in to brush his teeth. He'd rather liked this little chap, but you couldn't take a man too seriously after he'd admitted spending twelve thousand years in a bottle. It showed a certain dullness, a coarseness of fibre, Reggie thought, shaking his head regretfully. Also, he suspected that the whole thing was a gag. It bore the unmistakable and nutty stamp of one Fred McIntyre, a preposterously unstable chap who belonged to Reggie's club.

After preparing for bed, Reggie picked up the phone and called Freddy. He learned from his valet that Freddy was in Austria skiing.

"Well, it's someone else then," Reggie said aloud. He had, after all, quite a few friends with loosely screwed-on heads. Smiling, he popped into bed and fell asleep immediately.

The next morning, as Reggie was polishing off orange juice, the doorbell rang. He remembered Sari suddenly, and emitted a happy bleat as he sped to open the door. But his hopes were dashed as he found himself staring into the mournful eyes of the portly little man he had encountered the previous evening. Now the man wore a gray flannel suit, a black Homburg hat, and a striped tie of questionable taste. He bowed slightly, handed Reggie his hat and stick, and strolled into the apartment.

"What do you want?" Reggie said, feeling the first stirring of alarm.

"Oh, I have to know something of your friends before I choose the ones to destroy," the Jinn said. "I am an Oriental, but extremely practical, as you'll learn."

Reggie bit his lip. Suddenly, in the clear morning sunlight, he perceived that the situation had unpleasant overtones. Last night,

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fortified no doubt by several bottles of claret, he had dismissed it as a prank. Now he recalled that this mournful little chap *had* been inside that bottle. This fact lent a disturbing credence to the rest of his story. The business of being a Jinn, and a Jinn bent on vengeance, was now unhappily verified — and the conclusions to be drawn from *that* were sobering.

At this point the doorbell rang.

"Ah, friends I trust," the Jinn said, and in his little smile there was something cold and cheerless.

Reggie suddenly remembered Sari. "Now see here," he said, "this isn't cricket. You leave my friends alone."

"You weren't concerned about them last night," the Jinn said, laughing softly. "What has changed your mind?"

"It's that tie you're wearing, I suppose," Reggie said moodily. "A man who'd wear those stripes with a flannel suit might do anything."

The Jinn fingered the tie uneasily. "There are more important things in life than clothes," he said.

"Oh, don't talk rot," Reggie said.

The bell sounded again, insistently this time.

"Excuse me," Reggie muttered. He tossed the Jinn's hat and stick into a chair and went to the door.

Sari threw her arm about his neck. "Darling, it's wonderful to be back," she said.

Sari was a lovely, a delightful girl, with glinting red hair, piquant, good-humored features, and a body that would have caused a riot in the ranks of a Civil War Veteran's convention. The top of her head came just up to Reggie's chin, and she looked as if she had been assembled by a craftsman who loved his work. Now, wearing a black sheath dress, the trimness of her waist, the graceful curve of her bosom, and the exciting swell of her hips, were all delightfully evident.

Reggie had seldom been happier. Grinning, he put his arms around her and said, "I say, old chum —"

Then he stopped abruptly. Across her shoulder he saw the Jinn smiling at them, his deep mournful eyes glinting malevolently. The Jinn had raised one plump hand, and extended a finger at Sari's back.

Stifling a nervous impulse to faint, Reggie put his hands on Sari's hips and pushed her away from him. "Now, my dear young lady, relax," he said. He took out a handkerchief and mopped his high, bony forehead. Sari regarded him with a small, puzzled smile.

"What, in Heaven's name, is the matter with you?" she said. "Is it a family anniversary on which the oldest son must live

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chastely to appease the ancestral gods? Or have you simply forgotten me?"

Looking at her, Reggie realized that this wouldn't be easy. However, it must be done — for Sari's sake.

"Now see here, I've told you it's all over," he said, shooting a side glance at the Jinn, who was watching them with a small puzzled frown.

"What *are* you talking about?" Sari said.

Reggie bit a figurative bullet. "I'm going to be married. Didn't you know?"

"Of course I did, you ass. You're marrying me."

"No, that's all over," Reggie said. He turned his back to her and waved a hand in what he imagined was a grand gesture of dismissal. Reggie had never played a scene like this before, and he found himself enjoying it. Scraps and nuggets from the cinema worked their way to the surface of his spongy mind, as he continued to wave a hand grandly. "It's better to find out now," he murmured. "Wherever we went, Rangoon, Singapore, East Chicago, there'd be spiteful rumors following us. And so I must marry Guinevere." He let his arm fall limply to his side.

"Who in hell is Guinevere?" Sari demanded in a voice that barely managed to sound ladylike.

"It won't be everything I dreamed of," Reggie went on, to the cue of some invisible director, whom he could imagine weeping quietly into his megaphone. "Guinevere's father wants me in the firm — vice-president, to start, I dare say. It will be a quiet life — polo, swimming, the market." He gulped, caught up with the sadness of it all. "And children," he added, lowering his head.

There was a sharp noise behind him which Reggie took for the rattle of applause. He turned, smiling weakly, and saw that Sari had gone. The noise had been the emphatic banging of the door.

The Jinn, he saw, was staring at the door with an odd light in his mournful eyes. "That was a very attractive young woman," he said. "You — you don't want her?"

"Attractive?" Reggie shrugged. "Well, you've been out of circulation quite a while. Anything probably looks good to you."

"I must see this Guinevere," the Jinn said, thoughtfully.

"Oh, she's out of town."

"I have plenty of time," the Jinn said, and moved slightly to one side and disappeared.

Reggie rubbed his forehead nervously. Now he was in a sweet mess. Sari gone, out of his life forever, no doubt, and this sad-eyed little Jinn hanging about to pounce on a fictitious Guinevere.

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Well, he thought, bouncing up to a more optimistic level, there was no point in letting all this disrupt his routine. He decided to go to his club for lunch. . . .

Reggie felt considerably better after a pre-luncheon Martini. He stood at the bar, surrounded by the pleasant babble of conversation and clinking ice, and stared at the reflection of his long vacant face in the bar mirror. Thinking of nothing at all, he was enjoying himself in his usual fashion, when a hand fell on his shoulder.

"Hallo, old chum," a reedy voice said.

Reggie turned and saw Freddy McIntyre standing beside him, a broad smile on his narrow cheerful face. Freddy was one of Reggie's dearest friends, a kindred spirit, affable, casual, the owner of an unclouded temper, a non-functioning mind.

"I say, what about the skiing," Reggie said, remembering that he'd called Freddy the night before.

Freddy laughed explosively. "Good joke, that. No snow. Went there in the wrong season. Travel agent bloke said something about it, but it slipped my mind."

Reggie laughed, too. This was the thing he valued in Freddy. He put an arm about Freddy's shoulder and called for more drinks. However, as he glanced at the bartender, he saw the Jinn's reflection in the mirror. Reggie gulped, feeling a nasty chill go down his back, and looked along the bar. There, sipping a tall drink, brazen as any member, stood the Jinn, watching them with his soft, mournful eyes.

The thought of the Jinn's vengeance descending on good old Freddy was unbearable, so Reggie jerked away and nudged him sharply in the ribs.

"Beat it, you silly ass," he snapped.

"Righto," Freddy said. Only things which he didn't understand struck him as logical. When he thought he understood a thing, which was seldom, it turned out inevitably that he didn't have it right, after all. And so he tossed off his drink and strolled away, not understanding Reggie's attitude, and therefore accepting it as logical and sensible.

The Jinn moved closer to Reggie, a suspicious little smile on his lips. "Is it possible that you have no friends? Don't attempt to play tricks on me, please."

At this precise moment Reggie heard another voice, a large, deep, confident voice, which carried in it the images of board meetings, huge officers, the exciting clatter of ticker tapes. It was the voice of a man of affairs — important, massive affairs. Reggie wheeled about, searching for the owner of that voice, that voice he always

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heard in the background of his fiscal conversations with Clive.

There he was, at a table in the corner, one big hand holding a Scotch and soda, the other gesturing with an expensive cigar, Million-Dollar Monroe, the man whose beautifully printed stocks had absorbed Reggie's patrimony like a thirsty sponge taking a drop of water. Seated with Million-Dollar Monroe was a tall, slack young man with gentle dreaming eyes. This was Teddy Cribmount, whose family paid him a goodish bit of money to stay in New York — their home being in Los Angeles. There was nothing peculiar about Teddy, except his curious conviction that Shakespeare had written the essays attributed to Bacon. He knew nothing of these matters himself, and so had hired a staff of elderly professors to prove his theory. They flooded him with reports which buttressed his notion, but failed always to prove it conclusively — and thus they kept on the payroll.

"Are you listening to me?" the Jinn demanded irritably.

"Well, to tell the truth, no," Reggie said.

"You seem to know those people at the corner table," the Jinn said.

Reggie was developing a certain atypical guile. "Why, certainly not," he said. He decided shrewdly that the Jinn had seen through his little trick of ignoring his friends, and was prepared to do something about it.

"Well, I'll drift along in that case," the Jinn said.

"See you around," Reggie murmured.

The Jinn left the barroom, but Reggie, watching in the mirror, saw him pause in the doorway, and then step aside to a position from which he could survey the room without being seen.

Reggie, barely managing to conceal his elation, strode over to Million-Dollar Monroe's table. He came up behind Monroe in time to hear him say, "Of course, Cribmount, I can't guarantee that I'll be able to let you into this deal, but I will try my best, and that —"

Reggie, beaming widely, slapped him on the back at that moment. "Old pal, old pal," he cried, in a voice of nauseating bonhomie.

Monroe looked up at him irritably, and then something changed in his face — the sort of change noticeable in a man's face the instant before he realizes he must throw up his dinner.

"Reggie," he said weakly.

"Old pal, old pal," Reggie said, and sat down and put an arm about Monroe's beefy, well-tailored shoulders. "It's been a long time, too long, dash it, since our last get-together. What?"

Monroe smiled weakly.

"Selling old Cribmount some stocks, are you?" Reggie said.

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"Some of those pretty, lovely stocks?"

"Hah, hah," Monroe said. Now the large, massive voice had developed a number of hysterical cracks. "Let's don't talk business now, eh? What about some drinks? Think the baseball situation is interesting? Now take the Cubs, I say, and there you have a team that —"

"Stocks are my meat," Reggie said with relish. "Ever since you put me in the clover I've loved the silly things." He poked Teddy firmly in the breast. "Take a tip, old chap, and let Monroe here handle your money. He'll triple it for you with no trouble." Sneaking a cautious look at the doorway, Reggie saw that the Jinn was watching Monroe with a speculative little frown.

"Rum thing, eh?" Teddy Cribmount said.

"The rummest," Reggie said, with a positive shake of his head. "Old Million-Dollar Monroe will treat you right. He's my dearest pal, the one bloke I couldn't do without."

"Nice of you to say so, very nice," Monroe muttered, wiping his damp forehead. "I've got to dash along now, if you don't mind."

Reggie led him to the front doors of the club, an arm about his shoulder, and prattling in a high carrying voice on the subject of his indebtedness to, and eternal friendship for, Million-Dollar Monroe. Monroe broke away from him at last and hurried for the street, his expression troubled, worried, and suspicious. Reggie's attitude disturbed him, to put it as mildly as possible.

Reggie smiled as he watched him go.

Returning to the bar, he noticed with a small warm sense of triumph that the Jinn had disappeared. . . .

Million-Dollar Monroe entered his hotel room fifteen minutes later and tossed his hat into a chair. There was a tall, *Brunhildean*-type blonde girl lying on the sofa staring intently into the pages of a comic book. She wore a halter and shorts.

"Guinevere," Monroe said irritably.

"Yeah?"

"Will you put that ridiculous book away? We're in trouble."

"Yeah? Ain't that a coincidence. So is the Black Wasp. A mountain just fell on him."

"Something similar may happen to us," Monroe said, pacing and rubbing his forehead.

"Awright, what's the beef?" Guinevere said, closing the book and stretching her preposterously curvesome body like a lazy, well-fed cat. She rolled onto her stomach and looked sideways at Monroe.

"You remember that whacky

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character, Reggie Van Alexander, I told you about?"

"The one you pushed the pretty paper onto?"

"Yeah. Well, I've just bumped into him," Monroe said. He frowned and shook his head. "Something wrong, very wrong. He was all smiles and good-will. Get that! After what I did to him, he greeted me as if I were a long-lost brother. It's — frightening."

"What do you mean?"

"That is not a normal way for a sucker to act," Monroe explained patiently. "Now, what's his game? That's what I'm wondering. He's got something cooking in that screwy head of his, and I want to lift the lid and take a peek into the pot. And there's where you come in. You meet this character and find out what he's got up his sleeve."

"Supposing he won't talk?"

Monroe glanced at Guinevere, inspecting her points calmly. Then he lit a cigar. "He'll talk," he said.

Reggie returned home at three in the afternoon. Clive was out shopping and the apartment was clean, quiet, and lonely. Reggie made himself a drink and slumped disconsolately in a chair, his mind a harbor for derelicts of gloomy thought. Sari was gone forever, and would never know the nobility of his renouncement. He thought sadly of her pretty red hair, and her understanding mind. She *did* understand him, dash it! That was the most comforting thing about her. She was one of a small, select group — those who understood Reggie. He sighed and thought of other things. Clive was out shopping. That meant a good dinner, at any rate. Well, every cloud, and all the rest of it, he thought.

The doorbell rang then, jarring him from his bitter-sweet reveries.

When Reggie opened the door, he did so with no idea of whom or what to expect. However, had he been told what to expect, specifically and carefully, he still wouldn't have believed it. He'd have laughed, and said, "Dash it, there just *aren't* girls like that anywhere in the world."

Still, there she was, a strapping Viking, with fine blonde hair, a sultry mouth, and long-lashed green eyes. She wore a white silk dress, a choker of pearls, and a diamond bracelet on her left wrist.

"I think I have the wrong apartment," she said, smiling delicately at Reggie.

"Perish the thought. All the flats here are identical. Hallway, living room, butler's pantry, stuff like that. Come in and look around. This one is like any other."

"Will 'do' for what?" Guinevere said, slightly taken aback.

Reggie smiled charmingly. "We can figure that out later, I dare say."

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Guinevere sauntered into the living room. Reggie was thinking, what luck! A gray afternoon had suddenly brightened. A wink ago he'd been in a blue funk, alone, not a soul to talk with. And now this creature had popped into his life, and in spite of her out-sized proportions, she looked conversationally adequate. Perhaps he could tell her about Sari and the Jinn. What a tonic it would be to discuss that somber, mournful little Jinn. Reggie giggled at this involuntary pun. Jinn and tonic. I say, wait till Freddy hears that one, he thought.

"What's so funny?" Guinevere said.

"Ah, nothing, nothing at all. Drink? Cigarette? Dance?"

Guinevere approached him slowly, her eyes soft and her body langorous. She put her arms about him and Reggie heard one of his vertebrae emit a surprised squeak.

Guinevere increased the pressure. "I lied to you," she said. "I didn't come here by mistake. I'm in trouble. I'm afraid."

"Afraid?" Reggie said, gasping for air. He could imagine nothing short of a rutting elk alarming this girl.

"Do you know a man named Monroe, Million-Dollar Monroe?" she asked.

"I say, this is a coincidence."

Guinevere smiled and led him to the sofa. She pulled him down beside her and stared into his eyes. "You do know him, then. He's a cheat. He's swindled me out of my last penny."

"Another coincidence," Reggie said, astonished.

"He's swindled you, too?"

"Well, so to speak."

"We must have revenge," Guinevere whispered, her lips close to Reggie's mouth. "Do you have any plans?"

Reggie drew away from her, inching toward the end of the sofa. "Why, no," he said, in a high, strained voice. Her nearness was disturbing. The sheath-tight silk dress strained to contain her majestically heaving bosom, and the sunlight glinted on her beautifully muscled, bare legs.

"I must have a cigarette," he said. He lit one and blew a shaky smoke ring.

"You have no plans?" Guinevere insisted.

"Well, no," Reggie said.

"But you must hate him." He cheated you, you said."

"Well, if a chap's a cheat he's got to cheat *someone*," Reggie said, reasonably. "Might as well be me as anyone else."

"You're teasing me, silly boy," Guinevere said ominously, and took him in her arms. "That isn't wise, you'll find.

"Now just a minute!" Reggie cried.

Guinevere tightened her grip. Reggie felt as if he were being

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squeezed to death against a perfumed, air-foam mattress. Not a bad way to check out, all things considered, he thought.

"Excuse me, but you left the door open," a cool voice said in the same tone its owner would have used in declining a packet of filthy postcards.

Reggie sprang to his feet as Guinevere released him, and saw with surprise and pleasure that Sari was standing just inside the door.

"What luck!" he cried. "I was just thinking of you."

"Obviously," Sari said, glancing briefly at Guinevere.

Guinevere put her hands on her hips. "You should have knocked," she said. "A lady would have knocked."

Sari smiled sweetly. "Did some lady tell you that, my dear?" Reggie, aren't you going to introduce me?"

"Well, dash it, this is —"

"I'm Guinevere," the Viking said, after Reggie had paused and scratched his head.

Sari's smile went a little lopsided. "It's true then, Reggie? I didn't quite believe you this morning, you know."

Still another coincidence, Reggie thought moodily. Here he'd invented a Guinevere, complete with wealthy father, for Sari's benefit, and now one turns up in the flesh — an amazing lot of flesh, at that.

Guinevere had seen Sari's defeat in the quality of her smile, and she strolled to the door in command of the situation. "When I'm through with your little man I'll drop him back in your lap," she said to Sari. "Don't worry, it may not be a long wait."

And with that she exited.

Sari came closer to Reggie, trying to keep her smile even. "Reggie, is there something you can't tell me, something you think I wouldn't understand?"

"Why, dash it, no."

"We are through then, and you're marrying this girl, Guinevere?"

"That's a nut-shellish way of putting it."

Sari shrugged helplessly. "I always knew you were unpredictable and a little bit — well, silly is the kindest word that occurs to me. I never thought you could surprise me. But you have now, Reggie. And it hurts more than I can tell you."

Reggie squirmed. Here was this delightful girl of his begging for a kind word, a sympathetic cluck under the chin, and he daren't do it — or the Jinn might pop up and annihilate her.

"Well, old girl, that's life," he said.

"I suppose it is, more's the pity," Sari said. She put out a hand hesitantly and touched Reggie's check. "Goodbye dear. I —

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I hope you'll be very happy."

And then she too left, but unlike Guinevere, her shoulders were not square, and there was no smile in her eyes or face.

Reggie stared after her, sighing, his face long and mournful. . . .

"Nah, he don't hate you," Guinevere said, for the fifth time. Attired once again in shorts and halter, she lay on the sofa thumbing through a comic book.

Monroe lit his dead cigar with hands that were visibly shaking. "He's *got* to hate me," he said in a ragged voice. "Why *don't* he hate me, answer me that?"

"Ah, stop beefing," Guinevere said, through a yawn. "Why worry? The guy's a simpleton."

"That's why I'm worried. How do you figure a simpleton? A smart guy you can figure, cause he figures like you do. But a simpleton is different."

There was a knock on the door.

"Now, who's this?" Monroe muttered.

"Why'n't you bore a hole in the door and peek?"

"You shut up!"

"Ah, open the door. You're coming apart."

Monroe went to the door and opened it. Standing in the corridor was a tall, solidly built man with iron gray hair and a wide, hungry mouth. He wore a black suit, a black shirt, and a white tie.

"Well, Pally," he said, grinning broadly. "Long time no see."

"Come in, Blocks," Monroe said. "What do you want?"

The man named Blocks strolled into the room, spinning his panama on a banana-sized finger. He raised both eyebrows and grinned at Guinevere. "Who's the tomato, Monroe?"

"Watch your language," Guinevere muttered. "You ain't in a vegetable market."

Blocks bowed from the waist. "I accept the rebuke, knowing it is meant kindly, sister. And now, since my business, such as it is, is with Daddykins here, why'n't you go into the bedroom and count up to a million. You can do it by twos if you like."

"Guinevere is over twenty-one," Monroe said. "What's on your mind?"

Blocks bowed to him, and tossed his panama over his shoulder. "Very well. The bartender of the Saxon club is a friend of mine, and this afternoon he relates to me a most interesting thing he has observed there this morning. It seems that you, and that prospect for a loony bin, Reggie Something-or-other, were behaving with almost unnatural admiration toward each other. Is this a correct account of the incident, or is it not?"

"Yeah, it beats me," Monroe said.

"That ain't all it's going to do to you," Blocks said, in a kindly

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voice. There was something in his eyes now, and in the set of his wide hungry mouth, that belied the tone of his voice.

"What're you talking about?"

"If memory don't fail, we was in that Reggie deal together," Blocks said. "Does or does not memory fail?"

"Sure we were. You got your cut, didn't you?"

"Did I? That is the ugly question I have been asking myself since learning of the great love between you and Reggie."

"What the hell do you mean?"

"Do not be stupid. Or do not be more stupid than I think you already have been. I will spell it out for you, Pally. Two guys put their talents together in the interests of fleecing a goofy lamb, who, for the sake of clarity, we shall call Reggie Something-or-other. The caper works sweetly, and the two craftsmen shake hands, divide the loot, and go off on other deeds of good-will. But, Pally, the sucker and one of these two honest swindlers, remain bosom buddies. Now, ain't that peculiar?"

"Of course it is," Monroe said hoarsely. "It's been driving me nuts all day."

"It has upset me, too," Blocks said. "Frankly, it has put some dirty pictures in my head. I see, much as I hate to, a faint sign which, as I look at it hard and unbelievingly, resembles nothing so much as a double-cross."

"Now, hold on," Monroe said, waving his hands frantically. "Get that idea out of your head."

"I will try," Blocks said, solemnly. "I will make inquiries, and investigate the facts, and I will try to get that idea out of my head. If I should not be successful, then I will come back and talk to you some more, Monroe. Do not disappoint me in my search for the truth by being elsewhere when I return. And now, I bid you goodby." Blocks retrieved his panama from the floor, bowed to Guinivere, and strolled from the room.

When the door slammed Guinevere yawned and glanced at her comic book. "Hey, they just threw the Black Wasp into a pot of boiling oil?" she observed, a moment later.

"I would like to change places with him," Million-Dollar Monroe said, picking up a whisky bottle and pouring himself a neat two fingers.

When the phone rang, Reggie leaped for it expectantly. It might be Sari, he was thinking. But the voice on the other end wasn't Sari's, although it was a pleasant voice, as men's voices go. It had a rich, chummy ring to it.

"Mr. Van Alexander, my name is Blocks, although that name may mean less than nothing to you at

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the moment. I am interested, in a pure and nosy manner, in your relations with one Million-Dollar Monroe."

Ah, Reggie thought, the Jinn attempting a circuitous maneuver.

"Mr. Monroe is a dear friend of mine," Reggie said firmly.

"That is very sad. There is no truth, I take it, to the rumor that he once fleeced you out of a sizable hunk of cash?"

"What nonsense! The chap's made money for me, and for himself, too, in all our transactions."

"This is indeed unfortunate. It shakes, to put it mildly, my faith in old pals, and all the old virtues. Thank you, Mr. Van Alexander."

The phone clicked in Reggie's ear, and he put the receiver down, shrugging. Well, if that *was* the Jinn, he'd sure outsmarted him.

He turned and started slightly as he saw the Jinn regarding him from the opposite side of the room. The Jinn looked tired; his round face was lined, and there was an anxious look in his soft, mournful eyes.

"It's been an exhausting day," he said. "I've been checking your acquaintances, and their reports on you seem to lead . . ." He made a vague gesture — " off into nowhere. It might have been simpler to destroy you and let it go at that."

"Well, you have a point," Reggie said. "Not a good one, but a point, nevertheless."

"I suppose you're right," the Jinn said moodily. He sat down and put his head back. "You don't mind if I rest a bit?"

"No, not at all," Reggie said. "The light bother you?"

"No, that's quite all right."

"Very well. I'll just have a drink, if you don't mind."

The Jinn didn't answer. He was asleep.

Reggie must have dozed, too, he realized, for he was awakened by a sharp rap on the door. As he tip-toed across the room, he saw that it was now dark outside. The Jinn was sleeping soundly, his fat little hands locked comfortably over his fat little paunch. Poor chap, Reggie thought, all tuckered out.

He opened the door and blanched as he recognized Guinevere. She caught his arms and said, "I'm frightened, I'm all alone, I had nowhere else to turn, Reggie."

You might have turned into the nearest wrestling arena, he thought, as she shook him imploringly, causing his head to oscillate like the pendulum of a very fast clock.

"S — stop it, dash it," he cried. "What's the matter with you?"

"Haven't you heard it on the radio?"

"Heard what?"

"Blocks shot Monroe, and the cops grabbed Blocks," Guinivere said, bending her knees in order

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to drop her head on Reggie's shoulder. "I — I've no one but you left, Reggie."

"There now, old girl," Reggie said, patting her formidable shoulder. "Come in and pull yourself together." He led her to the sofa and sat beside her, one arm about her waist.

Guinevere, the epitome of feminine dependence, snuggled close to him, weeping softly.

Dare I do it, Reggie was thinking, as a fiendish, Oriental plan slowly took shape in his mind. He studied it, appalled and yet fascinated by its sheer, gleaming caddishness. Caddish, that's what it was, and no mincing words. If it got around the club, he'd be cut dead by every decent member. They might even drum him out, and they'd be right, he thought, wagging his head thoughtfully. Still, there *were* things more important than the club. He couldn't think of one right off, but there must be lots. The flag, he thought, snapping his fingers. He decided to mush ahead.

"Guinevere, I love you," he said, in a calm, forceful voice. "I love you. You are everything to me. Everything. I cannot live without you."

From the corner of his eye he saw a flicker behind the Jinn's eyelids, and he almost lost heart. It was too monstrous, too horendous —

"Well, that brings up a few important problems," Guinevere said, sitting up and wiping her eyes. There was a happy tone in her voice — the tone a board chairman might use in explaining an increase in dividends for officers of the firm.

"Nothing else matters. I love you, I cannot live without you."

The Jinn laughed and got to his feet.

Guinevere emitted a startled scream.

"Do not be frightened, please," the Jinn said hastily.

"Who's this guy?" Guinevere demanded.

"Oh, just an old friend," Reggie said.

The Jinn was staring at Guinevere with parted lips, gleaming eyes. He studied her, his hands opening and closing slowly, studied her soaring bosom, her long-lashed eyes, the swell of her muscular thighs beneath the sheer silk dress.

"Guinevere," he said hoarsely, "do you like pretty things?"

"Well, yeah," Guinevere said.

The Jinn removed a sparkling diamond necklace from his pocket and dangled it before her eyes. Guinevere rose slowly, like one entranced, her eyes fixed dreamily on the bauble turning slowly in the Jinn's hands.

"Say, that's pretty," she murmured.

"You may have it," the Jinn

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said. He backed slowly from her, and Guinevere followed him, smiling softly now, her eyes fixed on the bracelet.

"I have other things for you," the Jinn said, in a low caressing voice. "Jewels, furs, yachts, pleasures and luxuries beyond your dreams. Will you come with me, Guinevere?"

"No!" Reggie cried, in what he hoped was a heart-broken voice.

He stood up, sighing tragically.

No one paid much attention to him. The Jinn put his arm about Guinevere's waist as she reached a hand out to touch the bracelet.

"Will you come with me?" he said, trembling like a bowl of Jello in an earthquake. "Will you marry me?"

"No!" Reggie cried.

"Yeah, I guess so," Guinevere said dreamily.

The Jinn wet his lips and smiled at Reggie. "This is the final act, my rescuer. This is the moment of vengeance. You I spare, gladly. I leave you thus — bereft of this woman who means all to you."

"It's a shoddy trick," Reggie muttered.

"Yes, so it is," the Jinn said. "I rather liked you, as a matter of fact. But this game has to be played out according to the rules. On that word I'll leave you."

Reggie threw an arm across his eyes and emitted a groan that would have earned him a consideration in the bloodiest of Verdi's operas.

When he dropped his arm a few seconds later, he was alone. Shaking his head at the enormity of what he'd done, he went to the bar and made himself a drink.

"You rotter," he said to himself, in a thin unhappy voice.

After a drink he felt better. After a second he was chuckling contentedly. . . .

A week later Sari and Reggie sat comfortably before a small cosy fire in Reggie's apartment. He had an arm about her slim waist, and in his free hand was a tall cool drink.

"I shouldn't have forgiven you, of course," Sari said, in the tones of a woman enjoying complete victory.

"Dash it, of course not," Reggie said, wagging his head resolutely. "Behaved like a cad, no doubt of it. Should have been locked away in the old canine cabana for good."

"I just couldn't resist all those midnight serenades," Sari said. "I mean, I couldn't resist what the neighbors were saying about them."

"Funny, I thought they were rather good," Reggie said pensively. "The old mandolin had mellowed with the years, it seemed to me."

"Still, there's a lot I don't understand," Sari said thought-

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fully. She glanced up at him, smiling slightly. "Your explanation was as full of holes as a nice ripe Swiss cheese."

Reggie coughed abruptly. "Nonsense," he said. "All perfectly clear. Lost a bet to Freddy. Simple, eh? Took over an old gal of his for a week. Clear, eh?"

"But who was that little man who was here the day I got back in town?" Sari said. "You know, the day you told me we were through, and so forth."

"Little man? No little man. You're raving, angel."

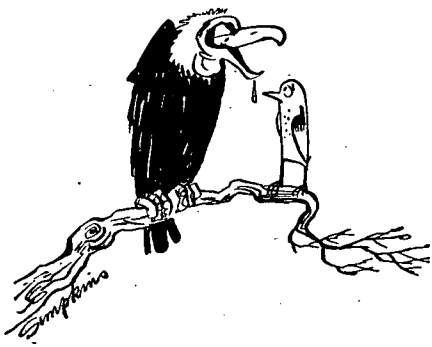
"Am I? He was very neatly dressed, and he had soft mournful eyes."

"Oh, him!" Reggie laughed hollowly. "Gas inspector."

"Well, if you won't tell, you won't," Sari said. "Let's forget him, shall we?"

"Righto," Reggie said, gratefully.

There was a knock on the door.



"Sure I like people — dead people!"

"Dash it," Reggie muttered. "Excuse me, pet."

He crossed the room, opened the door, and was nearly bowled off his feet as the Jinn, wild-eyed and trembling shot past him into the room.

"The door, close it, bolt it," he said, in a high, quavering voice.

"That's the man!" Sari said, springing to her feet.

The Jinn stared at Sari blankly, and then caught Reggie's arm with fluttering hands. "You may have her back, you understand?" he said. "You *must* take her back, I insist."

Reggie felt a twinge of compassion as he looked into the haunted eyes of the Jinn. The man had had a bad time, obviously. There were scratches on his cheeks, a trembling hysteria in his mouth, and a look in his eyes of a man who has been extended and drained to the limits of his capacity.

"She's a beast," the Jinn wept. "Insatiable, mad. I took her to Atlantic City, established her in a fine suite —" He shook his head, his eyes glazing with horror at his memories. "I have not been out of that suite until tonight," he muttered brokenly.

"Well," Reggie said, his self-interest warring with his sympathy, "you got yourself into this thing, old chap."

"*What* is this all about?" Sari demanded.

The Jinn looked at her, and a

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glint of recognition appeared in his eyes. "Of course, of course," he said thoughtfully. "I think I see it all now." He got hold of himself with an effort, and glanced at Reggie. "This is the girl you love, of course. You took advantage of me, I see. You foisted the other one off on me, didn't you?" He shook his head, his expression mournful and injured. "Frankly, I didn't expect that from you."

"Well, it gave me a turn, I must admit," Reggie said uncomfortably. "After all, standards, the code, all that rot. You won't bruit it about, will you?"

"No, but I shall do now what I should have done in the first place," the Jinn said. "I have no other alternative." He glanced unhappily at Sari. "There's nothing personal in this, believe me," he said. "As a matter of fact, I have little taste left for these maneuverings. Once they seemed quite pleasant and stimulating, but . . ." He paused, shrugging. "It's age, perhaps, but I find it all very tiresome. The tranquillity of my imprisonment I once found irksome. Now, I feel that it was the only peace I have ever known. Still, I am here, and I must do what I promised."

"What *are* you talking about?" Sari said.

The Jinn raised a hand and pointed his finger at her.

Reggie hid his eyes.

Suddenly, the door vibrated under a series of blows and kicks.

"Lemme in, you bastards," a furious voice shouted. "I know that little twerp is hiding in there."

The Jinn sank to his knees. "Guinevere," he cried, in a breaking voice.

Another violent onslaught shook the door.

"Seems determined," Reggie murmured.

"I am abandoned and lost," the Jinn said, striking his forehead with the palm of his hand.

Reggie stepped nimbly to the liquor cabinet and removed the stopper from a bottle of brandy. "Psst!" he said, winking at the Jinn.

The Jinn stared at the open bottle, his lips moving slowly. ". . . No," he murmured.

"Lemme in!" Guinevere yelled from beyond the door.

"Nothing to do but open the door," Reggie said, sighing. "Sorry, old chap."

"Wait!" The Jinn rose to his feet. "I — I think I will take advantage of your hospitality. Farewell."

He closed his eyes, and immediately his body shimmered and dissolved into a column of oily gray vapor. Sari let out an astonished shriek and collapsed into a chair. The smoke thinned out to a twisting ropy length, and headed swiftly for the refuge of the open bottle.

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Reggie watched the last wisps of it snake themselves hurriedly from sight, and then, sighing philosophically, he re-stoppered the bottle with a firm hand. Strolling to the door, he greeted a panting and outraged Guinevere with a bland smile.

"Well, well, the lucky bride, and all the rest of it," he said. "Congratulations, and so forth."

Guinivere shoved him aside and strode into the room, her manner that of a tigress stalking a young and startled deer.

"Where is he?" she demanded.

"Where is *whom?*" Reggie said, congratulating himself on these grammatical pyrotechnics.

"You know well enough. That twerp I met here."

"Oh, *him*," Reggie said. "Well, he called and said something about going to Los Angeles. I bid him all the best, *bon voyage*, and that was that. Naturally, I assumed he had —"

"Oh, shut up!" Guinevere said, and dashed from the room, slamming the door behind her with a grand display of pique.

Reggie strolled over and sat down on the arm of Sari's chair. She was still huddled there, hands pressed to her eyes.

"Well, old girl, excitement's over," Reggie said.

"Did I see it? Or was I dreaming?"

"What *are* you raving about?"

"That man — he turned into smoke. Didn't he?"

Reggie patted her shoulder gently, thinking tenderly of what delicate webbing went into the construction of these marvelous females. Here was his Sari, as formidable as most of her sisters, surely, all in a pother about a Jinn's going up in smoke.

What did she *expect* from a Jinn, Reggie mused, slightly upset by this insight into the curious female mind. Still, the poor, dear, giddy creatures had to be protected from themselves, he decided.

"Man going up in smoke, you say?" He laughed heartily. "Good joke, that."

"Then I was dreaming?"

"And a jolly good dream it must have been," Reggie said, feeling strong and masterful. He strolled to the liquor cabinet and picked up the bottle in which the Jinn had sought refuge. Putting it to his ear he heard a faint voice inside the bottle, a faint voice singing something in a blurred, off-key, but quite cheerful manner. Reggie put the bottle at the back of the liquor cabinet, deep in a forest of other bottles.

Then, brushing his hands, he wandered back to Sari, thinking nostalgically of the Jinn, and comforted by the realization that the brandy in which he currently floated was imported stuff, and very, very old.

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RESERVATION DEFERRED

By JOHN WYNDHAM

Ghosts have changed since we were young. These days they (the female of the species anyway) have discarded the old-fashioned, unflattering shroud for bra and panties, and now wear nail polish and kiss-proof lipstick. And where the old-timers still cling to tradition, today's ghost wouldn't be caught dead rattling chains and screeching in attics on stormy nights.

Take Virginia, for example. You couldn't ask for a more attractive ghost. Yet even she was much too worldly, too cynical about matters most of us hold in reverence. To permit her to poison the mind of a sweet girl like Amanda, who was ill but still very much alive — well, whoever is in charge of phantoms should be court-martialed and shot!

DYING, at seventeen, and provided the circumstances allow it to be decorous, can be terribly romantic. The picture one makes: pretty, though a little pale, spiritual-eyed; displayed, as it were, against a pile of pillows, with the frills of the nylon nightie showing beneath the lacy wool bed-jacket; the lights in one's hair glistened by the bedside lamp, the slender hand so delicately ivory against the pale pink silk of the eiderdown comforter.

The bud scarce unfurled, the dew still undried, the heart not yet hardened.

Character, too: patience, sweetness, gratitude for the little things people do, kindly forgiveness to the doctors one has defeated, sympathy for those who are weepy about one, resignation, quiet fortitude. It can all be very beautiful and sad-romantic, and not nearly so distressing as people think—

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Illustrator: Charles Berger

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particularly if one is quite sure of heaven, as Amanda was.

Search as she might, she could find no more than a few feather-weight reproaches to lay upon herself. The one or two peccadilloes she had managed to dredge up from earliest childhood — matters concerning an ownerless penny spent on sweets, an apple that had fallen from a barrow, one's failure to own up to putting the thumb-tack on Daphne Deakin's chair — would, the Rev. Mr. Willis assured her, be unlikely to have any appreciable effect upon the granting of her entry permit. So, in a way, she had an advantage over other people who would have to go on living longer lives, and probably earning black marks in the course of them. There was a lot of compensation in being assured of heaven.

At the same time, she would have liked to be a little surer of what to expect there. Mr. Willis was positive enough about the place, but in such a general way; so difficult to pin down to details. He tended, too, to evade the more piercing questions, with unsatisfactory observations on the possibility of something happening which would make the exact nature of heaven a less urgent question for her. In fact, nobody seemed either to know much about heaven, or to be willing to discuss its organizations with her.

Dr. Frobisher, after admitting his ignorance, always steered the conversation to what he called a less morbid topic — though how heaven, of all places, could be classified as morbid Amanda failed to understand. It was much the same with her mother. Mrs. Day's expression would cloud; she would answer awkwardly once or twice, and then say, "Darling, let's talk about something more cheerful, shall we?" So Amanda, though she did not in the least understand how heaven could be heaven if it weren't cheerful, would, in the sweetness of her disposition, talk about something quite uninteresting, instead.

Still, it was very nice to know that one was qualified for heaven, and that everyone was agreed about it. Rather like winning a scholarship and becoming self-supporting at an early age, and carrying something of an obligation to be kind and thoughtful towards those who had not such advantages.

A slow decline, someone had called it — a funny idea, that: the Present, the Imperfect, the Perfect — but it was prettier to think of petals falling, fluttering softly down until one day they would all be gone, and people would cry a little and say how brave she had been, and how happy she must be in heaven now.

And possibly it would have gone off tidily like that, but for the ghost.

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Just at first, Amanda did not realise she was a ghost. When she woke up and saw her standing inside the door, she thought for a moment that perhaps they had now got a night nurse who was looking in to see how she was doing. Then it occurred to her that a nurse would very likely be wearing more than just silk panties and bra, and also that she oughtn't to be visible at all, because the room was dark. The ghost, seeing her there, showed a trace of surprise.

"Oh, sorry to intrude," she said. I thought you would have gone by now." And she turned as if to leave.

She was a very unalarming-looking ghost. A friendly-seeming girl with slightly red hair, rather wide eyes, an enviable figure, and charming hands and feet. Amanda guessed her at about seven or eight years older than herself.

"No. Please don't go," she told her, on impulse.

The ghost turned back, a little surprised.

"You're sure you don't mind?" she said gratefully. "I mean, people are so touchy. Usually they scream."

"I don't see why," said Amanda. "Anyhow, I'll probably be a ghost or something myself soon."

"Oh, I shouldn't think so," said the ghost, in a social-polite voice.

"Come and sit down. You can put the eiderdown round you if you feel cold," invited Amanda.

"Luckily, that's not one of my troubles," said the ghost, sitting down and crossing one elegant leg over the other.

"Er. . . my name's Amanda," Amanda told her.

"Mine's Virginia," said the ghost. "I can't imagine why."

There was a pause, during which Amanda's curiosity mounted. She hesitated, then she said: "I hope it's not something I shouldn't ask, but how do you happen to be a ghost? I mean, I thought people just went to one place or the other, if you see what I mean."

"One place or the other?" repeated Virginia. "Oh, I see. No, it isn't quite as simple as that. But, anyway, I'm a special case — a sort of D.P. at the moment. The whole thing is *sub judice*, so I just have to wander round until they've made up their minds."

Amanda was puzzled. "How do you mean?" she asked.

"Well," explained Virginia, "when my husband strangled me, it looked just like an ordinary murder, really. But then someone raised a question about the degree of provocation. If they decide I went above a particular reading, they can bring it in as suicide, which would be bad. Of course, I should appeal on grounds of prior counter-provocation. He's that tame sort who would provoke a saint into provoking him. I sup-

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pose I did overdo it a bit. But if you knew him, you'd understand."

"What's it like? Being strangled, I mean?" Amanda asked, interestedly.

"Horrid, really," said Virginia. "And I'd have been more careful if I'd known it was going to lead to all this hanging around while they argue about it."

"It's disappointing," said Amanda. "I was hoping you might be able to tell me something about heaven."

"Heaven? Why?"

"Well," said Amanda, "nobody here seems to be able to tell me, and I expect to be going there soon. So I thought it'd be nice to know what it's like."

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Virginia, opening her wide eyes wider.

Amanda did not see that there was any "Good gracious!" about it. Expecting to go to heaven seemed to her a very reasonable ambition. She said so.

"Dear, dear. Poor thing," observed Virginia compassionately.

In anyone less sweet than Amanada, her faint moue might have been called sulkiness. "I don't see what's wrong with that," she said.

"From personal observation, I wouldn't —" began Virginia.

"Oh, you do know about it, then?"

"I've looked it over. Parts of it, anyway," Virginia admitted.

Amanda's interest kindled. She propped herself a little higher against the pillows. "Oh, please tell me about it, please!" she begged eagerly.

Virginia considered. "Well," she said, "the first district I saw was the oriental section. It's all very gorgeous and technicolored, and you wear lots of jewels and a veil and transparent trousers. The men wear beards and turbans, and you have to cluster round them in groups of not less than twenty to each. It looks a bit like autograph-hunting, only it isn't, of course. Then, after a time, he beckons one out of the mob, and it always turns out to be somebody else, and so you have to go and find another place to cluster, and everybody simply loathes you for crashing in on their lot. It's all terribly frustrating."

"Is that all?" asked Amanda unhappily.

"Pretty much. You can eat turkish-delight in the intervals of course, and I suppose by the law of averages —"

"I mean, it doesn't sound a bit like I thought."

"Oh, it's different in different sections. The Nordic part isn't a bit like that. There you spend nearly all your time washing and bandaging great gashes in heroes, and making broth for them in between whiles. I suppose it's all

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right for people who happen to have had a hospital training, but it seemed frightfully gory and messy to me. Besides, the heroes are such types. Never take a scrap of notice of you. They're either bragging, or flat out, or just off to get some more gashes. All terribly tedious, I thought."

"That doesn't sound quite the kind —" Amanda began.

But Virginia went on: "Still, I must say, for high-octane tediousness you want to take a look at the Nirvana district. Talk about highbrow! You can only see it if you peep over the wall, because there's a notice saying 'No women allowed', and —"

"What I was meaning," Amanda interrupted firmly, "is the ordinary kind of heaven. You know, the one they tell us about when we're children, but never seem to explain properly."

"Oh, that one," said Virginia. "Oh, my dear! So prim. I wouldn't advise it, really. So much choral singing and poetry reading all the time. Good, you know, high quality and all that, but sort of serious — and the music being all trumpets and harps gets kind of monotonous. So much white's awfully tiring, too. The whole thing's frightfully — what's the word, antiseptic? — no, ascetic, that's it. They've got a no-marriage law there. Imagine it! The result is nobody dares even ask you out for a cup of coffee after the music for fear of being arrested. Mind you, I daresay saints like it quite a lot —" She broke off. "You're not a saint, are you?"

" — I don't think so."

"Well, unless you are, I simply wouldn't recommend it." Virginia went on, giving details.

Amanda listened to her with growing dismay. At last she broke in: "But it just *can't* be like that. You're simply spoiling everything for me. I was so happy knowing I was going to heaven, too. I think you're just being cruel and beastly."

Virginia stared at her. Then she said: "But my poor dear, don't you understand. They're all men's heavens, and that's hell for women. Seems as if nobody ever got around to designing a heaven for women, don't ask me why. But, honest, I'd keep well clear of these men's heavens if I were you."

But at that point Amanda's tears overflowed. The sound of her own unhappy sobs prevented her from hearing any more, and when she looked up again Virginia had gone.

In fact, Amanda was so disappointed that she was irritable and surprised everyone by starting to get better.

And when she was quite well she married an accountant who seemed to think of heaven as the perfect cybernetics machine, and that wasn't very interesting to a girl, either.

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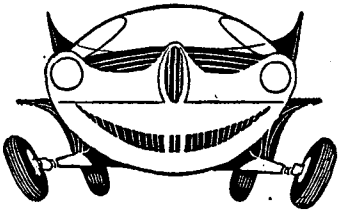
Illustrator: Emish



SALLY

By ISAAC ASIMOV

With the highway slaughter mounting year after year, something pretty drastic must be done. We can't suggest eliminating all automobiles; no government body would dare to legislate us back on our feet. That leaves but one answer: make cars more intelligent than their drivers!

Sure, it can be done. Look at all these cybernetic brains they're using nowadays. Solve everything from your income tax to the number of molecules you can squeeze into a moustache cup. After a few minor adjustments, one of these mechanical minds could be installed to take over the operation of your Plymouth. Nothing to do but sit back and be driven to your destination without danger of being plowed into by some moron.

Of course, there is one fly in the gas tank, so to speak. Suppose you let Isaac Asimov (we understand he never learned to drive!) tell you about it in this unique story of the future rulers of the roads.

SALLY was coming down the lake road, so I waved to her and called her by name. I always liked to see Sally. I liked all of them, you understand, but Sally's the prettiest one of the lot. There just isn't any question about it.

She moved a little faster when I waved to her. Nothing undignified. She was never that. She moved just enough faster to show that she was glad to see me, too.

I turned to the man standing beside me. "That's Sally," I said.

He smiled at me and nodded.

Mrs. Hester had brought him in. She said, "This is Mr. Gellhorn, Jake. You remember he sent you the letter asking for an appointment."

That was just talk, really. I have a million things to do around the Farm and one thing I just can't waste my time on is mail. That's why I have Mrs. Hester around. She lives pretty close by, she's good at attending to foolishness without running to me about it,

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and most of all, she likes Sally and the rest. Some people don't.

"Glad to see you, Mr. Gellhorn," I said.

"Raymond J. Gellhorn," he said, and gave me his hand, which I shook and gave back.

He was a largish fellow, half a head taller than I and wider, too. He was about half my age, thirty-ish. He had black hair, plastered down slick, with a part in the middle, and a thin mustache, very neatly trimmed. His jawbones got big under his ears and made him look as if he had a slight case of mumps. On video he'd be a natural to play the villain, so I assumed he was a nice fellow. It goes to show that video can't be wrong all the time.

"I'm Jacob Folkers," I said. "What can I do for you?"

He grinned. It was a big, wide, white-toothed grin. "You can tell me a little about your Farm here, if you don't mind."

I heard Sally coming up behind me and I put out my hand. She slid right into it and the feel of the hard, glossy enamel of her fender was warm in my palm.

"A nice automatobile," said Gellhorn.

That's one way of putting it. Sally was a 2045 convertible with a Hennis-Carleton positronic motor and an Armat chassis. She had the cleanest, finest lines I've ever seen on any model, bar none. For five years, she'd been my favorite and I'd put everything into her I could dream up. In all that time, there'd never been a human being behind her wheel.

Not once.

"Sally," I said, patting her gently, "meet Mr. Gellhorn."

Sally's cylinder-purr keyed up a little. I listened carefully for any knocking. Lately, I'd been hearing motor-knock in almost all the cars and changing the gasoline hadn't done a bit of good. Sally was as smooth as her paint job this time, however.

"Do you have names for all your cars?" asked Gellhorn.

He sounded amused, and Mrs. Hester doesn't like people to sound as though they were making fun of the Farm. She said, sharply, "Certainly. The cars have real personalities, don't they, Jake? The sedans are all males and the convertibles are females."

Gellhorn was smiling again. "And do you keep them in separate garages, ma'am?"

Mrs. Hester glared at him.

Gellhorn said to me, "And now I wonder if I can talk to you alone, Mr. Folkers?"

"That depends," I said. "Are you a reporter?"

"No, sir. I'm a sales agent. Any talk we have is not for publication. I assure you I am interested in strict privacy."

"Let's walk down the road a bit. There's a bench we can use."

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We started down. Mrs. Hester walked away. Sally nudged along after us.

I said, "You don't mind if Sally comes along, do you?"

"Not at all. She can't repeat what we say, can she?" He laughed at his own joke, reached over and rubbed Sally's grille.

Sally raced her motor and Gellhorn's hand drew away quickly.

"She's not used to strangers," I explained.

We sat down on the bench under the big oak tree where we could look across the small lake to the private speedway. It was the warm part of the day and the cars were out in force, at least thirty of them. Even at this distance I could see that Jeremiah was pulling his usual stunt of sneaking up behind some staid older model, then putting on a jerk of speed and yowling past with deliberately squealing brakes. Two weeks before he had crowded old Angus off the asphalt altogether and I had turned off his motor for two days.

It didn't help though, I'm afraid, and it looks as though there's nothing to be done about it. Jeremiah is a sports model to begin with and that kind is awfully hot-headed.

"Well, Mr. Gellhorn," I said. "Could you tell me why you want the information?"

But he was just looking around. He said, "This *is* an amazing place, Mr. Folkers."

"I wish you'd call me Jake. Everyone does."

"All right, Jake. How many cars do you have here?"

"Fifty-one. We get one or two new ones every year. One year we got five. We haven't lost one yet. They're all in perfect running order. We even have a '15 model Mat-O-Mot in working order. One of the original automatics. It was the first car here."

Good old Matthew. He stayed in the garage most of the day now, but then he was the grand-daddy of all positronic-motored cars. Those were the days when blind war veterans, paraplegics and heads of state were the only ones who drove automatics. But Samson Harridge was my boss and he was rich enough to be able to get one. I was his chauffeur at the time.

The thought makes me feel old. I can remember when there wasn't an automobile in the world with brains enough to find its own way home. I chauffeured dead lumps of machines that needed a man's hand at their controls every minute. Every year machines like that used to kill tens of thousands of people.

The automatics fixed that. A positronic brain can react much faster than a human one, of course, and it paid people to keep

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hands off the controls. You got in, punched your destination and let it go its own way.

We take it all for granted now, but I can remember the days when the first laws came out forcing the old machines off the highways and limiting travel to automatics. Lord, what a fuzz. They called it everything from communism to fascism. But it emptied the highways and stopped the killing, and still more people get around more easily the new way.

Of course, the automatics were ten to a hundred times as expensive as the hand-driven ones, and there weren't many that could afford a private vehicle. The industry specialized in turning out omnibus-automatics. You could always call a company and have one stop at your door in a matter of minutes and take you where you wanted to go. Usually, you had to drive with others who were going your way, but what's wrong with that?

Samson Harridge had a private car though, and I went to him the minute it arrived. The car wasn't Matthew to me then. I didn't know it was going to be the dean of the Farm some day. I only knew it was taking my job away and I hated it.

I said, "You won't be needing me any more, Mr. Harridge?"

He was a pretty old man even then, with white hair and pink clean-shaven cheeks, almost like a little boy's. In those days, everyone knew what he looked like. He was one of the richest men in North America.

He said, "What are you dithering about, Jake? You don't think I'll trust myself to a contraption like that, do you? You stay right at the controls."

I said, "But it works by itself, Mr. Harridge. It scans the road, reacts properly to obstacles, humans, and other cars, and remembers routes of travel."

"So they say. So they say. Just the same, you're sitting right behind the wheel in case anything goes wrong."

Funny how you can get to like a car. In no time I was calling it Matthew and was spending all my time keeping it polished and humming. A positronic brain stays in condition best when it's got control of its chassis at all times, which means it's worth keeping the gas tank filled so that the motor can turn over slowly day and night. After a while, it got so I could tell by the sound of the motor how Matthew felt.

In his own way, Harridge grew fond of Matthew, too. He had no one else to like. He'd divorced or outlived three wives and outlived five children and three grandchildren. So when he died, maybe it wasn't surprising that he had his estate converted into a Farm for Retired Automobiles, with me in charge and Matthew the first

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member of a distinguished line.

It's turned out to be my life. I never got married. You can't get married and still tend to automatics the way they should be attended.

The newspapers thought it was funny, but after a while they stopped joking about it. Some things you can't joke about. Maybe you've never been able to afford an automatic and maybe you never will, either, but take it from me, you get to love them. They're hard-working and affectionate. It takes a man with no heart to mistreat one or to see one mistreated.

It got so that after a man had an automatic for a while, he would make provisions for having it left to the Farm, if he didn't have an heir he could rely on to give it good care.

I explained that to Gellhorn.

He said, "Fifty-one cars! That represents a lot of money."

"Fifty thousand minimum per automatic, original investment," I said. "They're worth a lot more now. I've done things for them."

"It must take a lot of money to keep up the Farm."

"You're right there. The Farm's a non-profit organization, which gives us a break on taxes and, of course, new automatics that come in usually have trust funds attached. Still, costs are always going up. I have to keep the place landscaped; I keep laying down new asphalt and keeping the old in repair; there's gasoline, oil, repairs, and new gadgets. It adds up."

"And you've spent a long time at it."

"I sure have, Mr. Gellhorn. Thirty-three years."

"You don't seem to be getting much out of it yourself."

"I don't? You surprise me, Mr. Gellhorn. I've got Sally and fifty others. Look at her."

I was grinning. I couldn't help it. Sally was so clean, it almost hurt. Some insect must have died on her windshield or one speck of dust too many had landed, so she was going to work. A little tube protruded and spurted Tergosol over the glass. It spread quickly over the silicone surface film and squeejees snapped into place instantly, passing over the windshield and forcing the water into the little channel that led it, dripping, down to the ground. Not a speck of water got onto her glistening apple-green hood. Squeejee and detergent tube snapped back into place and disappeared.

Gellhorn said, "I never saw an automatic do that."

"I guess not," I said. "I fixed that up specially on our cars. They're clean. They're always scrubbing their glass. They like it. I've even got Sally fixed up with wax jets. She polishes herself every night till you can see your

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face in any part of her and shave by it. If I can scrape up the money, I'd be putting it on the rest of the girls. Convertibles are very vain."

"I can tell you how to scrape up the money, if that interests you."

"That always does. How?"

"Isn't it obvious, Jake? Any of your cars is worth fifty thousand minimum, you said. I'll bet most of them top six figures."

"So?"

"Ever think of selling a few?"

I shook my head. "You don't realize it, I guess, Mr. Gellhorn, but I can't sell any of these. They belong to the Farm, not to me."

"The mony would go to the Farm."

"The incorporation papers of the Farm provide that the cars receive perpetual care. They can't be sold."

"What about the motors, then?"

"I don't understand you."

Gellhorn shifted position and his voice got confidential. "Look here, Jake, let me explain the situation. There's a big market for private automatics if they could only be made cheaply enough. Right?"

"That's no secret."

"And ninety-five per cent of the cost is the motor. Right? Now, I know where we can get a supply of bodies. I also know where we can sell automatics at a good price — twenty or thirty thousand for the cheaper models, maybe fifty or sixty for the better ones. All I need are the motors. You see the solution?"

"I don't, Mr. Gellhorn." I did, but I wanted him to spell it out.

"It's right here. You've got fifty-one of them. You're an expert automatobile mechanic, Jake. You must be. You could unhook a motor and place it in another car so that no one would know the difference."

"It wouldn't be exactly ethical."

"You wouldn't be harming the cars. You'd be doing them a favor. Use your older cars. Use that old Mat-O-Mot."

"Well, now, wait a while, Mr. Gellhorn. The motors and bodies aren't two separate items. They're a single unit. Those motors are used to their own bodies. They wouldn't be happy in another car."

"All right, that's a point. That's a very good point, Jake. It would be like taking your mind and putting it in someone else's skull. Right? You don't think you would like that?"

"I don't think I would. No."

"But what if I took your mind and put it into the body of a young athlete. What about that, Jake? You're not a youngster anymore. If you had the chance, wouldn't you enjoy being twenty again? That's what I'm offering some of your positronic motors.

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They'll be put into new '57 bodies. The latest construction."

I laughed. "That doesn't make much sense, Mr. Gellhorn. Some of our cars may be old, but they're well-cared for. Nobody drives them. They're allowed their own way. They're *retired*, Mr. Gellhorn. I wouldn't want a twenty-year old body if it meant I had to dig ditches for the rest of my new life and never have enough to eat. . . . What do you think, Sally?"

Sally's two doors opened and then shut with a cushioned slam.

"What's that?" said Gellhorn.

"That's the way Sally laughs."

Gellhorn forced a smile. I guess he thought I was making a bad joke. He said, "Talk sense, Jake. Cars are *made* to be driven. They're probably not happy if you don't drive them."

I said, "Sally hasn't been driven in five years. She looks happy to me."

"I wonder."

He got up and walked toward Sally slowly. "Hi, Sally, how'd you like a drive?"

Sally's motor revved up. She backed away.

"Don't push her, Mr. Gellhorn," I said. "She's liable to be a little skittish."

There were two sedans about a hundred yards up the road. They had stopped. Maybe, in their own way, they were watching. I didn't bother about them. I had my eyes on Sally, and I kept them there.

Gellhorn said, "Steady now, Sally." He lunged out and seized the door handle. It didn't budge, of course.

He said, "It opened a minute ago."

I said, "Automatic lock. She's got a sense of privacy, Sally has."

He let go, then said, slowly and deliberately, "A car with a sense of privacy shouldn't go around with its top down."

He stepped back three or four paces, then quickly, so quickly I couldn't take a step to stop him, he ran forward and vaulted into the car. He caught Sally completely by surprise, because as he came down, he shut off the ignition before she could lock it in place.

For the first time in five years, Sally's motor was dead.

I think I yelled, but Gellhorn had the switch on "Manual" and locked that in place, too. He kicked the motor into action. Sally was alive again but she had no freedom of action.

He started up the road. The sedans were still there. They turned and drifted away, not very quickly. I suppose it was all a puzzle to them.

One was Giuseppe, from the Milan factories, and the other was Stephen. They were always together. They were both new at the Farm, but they'd been here

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long enough to know that our cars just didn't have drivers.

Gellhorn went straight on, and when the sedans finally got it through their heads that Sally wasn't going to slow down, that she *couldn't* slow down, it was too late for anything but desperate measures.

They broke for it, one to each side, and Sally raced between them like a streak. Steve crashed through the lakeside fence and rolled to a halt on the grass and mud not six inches from the water's edge. Giuseppe bumped along the land side of the road to a shaken halt.

I had Steve back on the highway and was trying to find out what harm, if any, the fence had done him, when Gellhorn came back.

Gellhorn opened Sally's door and stepped out. Leaning back, he shut off the ignition a second time.

"There," he said. "I think I did her a lot of good."

I held my temper. "Why did you dash through the sedans? There was no reason for that."

"I kept expecting them to turn out."

"They did. One went through a fence."

"I'm sorry, Jake," he said. "I thought they'd move more quickly. You know how it is. I've been in lots of buses, but I've only been in a private automatic two or three times in my life, and this is the first time I ever drove one. That just shows you, Jake. It got me, driving one, and I'm pretty hard-boiled. I tell you, we don't have to go more than twenty per cent below list price to reach a good market, and it would be ninety per cent profit."

"Which we would split?"

"Fifty-fifty. And I take all the risks, remember."

"All right. I listened to you. Now you listen to me." I raised my voice because I was just too mad to be polite anymore. "When you turn off Sally's motor, you hurt her. How would you like to be kicked unconscious? That's what you do to Sally, when you turn her off."

"You're exaggerating, Jake. The automatobusses get turned off every night."

"Sure, that's why I want none of my boys or girls in your fancy '57 bodies, where I won't know what treatment they'll get. Busses need major repairs in their positronic circuits every couple of years. Old Matthew hasn't had his circuits touched in twenty years. What can you offer him compared with that?"

"Well, you're excited now. Suppose you think over my proposition when you've cooled down and get in touch with me."

"I've thought it over all I want to. If I ever see you again, I'll call the police."

His mouth got hard and ugly.

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He said, "Just a minute, old-timer."

I said, "Just a minute, you. This is private property and I'm ordering you off."

He shrugged. "Well, then, goodbye."

I said, "Mrs. Hester will see you off the property. Make that goodbye permanent."

But it wasn't permanent. I saw him again two days later. Two and a half days, rather, because it was about noon when I saw him first and a little after midnight when I saw him again.

I sat up in bed when he turned the light on, blinking blindly till I made out what was happening. Once I could see, it didn't take much explaining. In fact, it took none at all. He had a gun in his right fist, the nasty little needle barrel just visible between two fingers. I knew that all he had to do was to increase the pressure of his hand and I would be torn apart.

He said, "Put on your clothes, Jake."

I didn't move. I just watched him.

He said, "Look, Jake, I know the situation. I visited you two days ago, remember. You have no guards on this place, no electrified fences, no warning signals. Nothing."

I said, "I don't need any. Meanwhile there's nothing to stop you from leaving, Mr. Gellhorn. I would if I were you. This place can be very dangerous."

He laughed a little. "It is, for anyone on the wrong side of a fist gun."

"I see it," I said. "I know you've got one."

"Then get a move on. My men are waiting."

"No, sir, Mr. Gellhorn. Not unless you tell me what you want, and probably not then."

"I made you a proposition day before yesterday."

"The answer's still no."

"There's more to the proposition now. I've come here with some men and an automatobus. You have your chance to come with me and disconnect twenty-five of the positronic motors. I don't care which twenty-five you choose. We'll load them on the bus and take them away. Once they're disposed of, I'll see to it that you get your fair share of the money."

"I have your word on that, I suppose."

He didn't act as if he thought I was being sarcastic. He said, "You have."

I said, "No."

"If you insist on saying no, we'll go about it in our own way. I'll disconnect the motors myself, only I'll disconnect all fifty-one. Every one of them."

"It isn't very easy to disconnect positronic motors, Mr. Gellhorn. Are you a robotics expert?

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Even if you are, you know, these motors have been modified by me."

"I know that, Jake. And to be truthful, I'm not an expert. I may ruin quite a few motors trying to get them out. That's why I'll have to work over all fifty-one if you don't cooperate. You see, I may only end up with twenty-five when I'm through. The first few I'll tackle will probably suffer the most. Till I get the hang of it, you see. And if I go it myself, I think I'll put Sally first in line."

I said, "I can't believe you're serious, Mr. Gellhorn."

He said, "I'm serious, Jake." He let it all dribble in. "If you want to help, you can keep Sally. Otherwise, she's liable to be hurt very badly. Sorry." He blew at his fist in an unconcerned gesture, as though to clear the tiny orifice of the needle gun. I would have cheered if it had gone off and left him faceless. I try to think the best of any man, but a two-legged animal who would think of treating cars in such a way has no right to the title Man.

I said, "I'll come with you, but I'll give you one more warning. You'll be in trouble, Mr. Gellhorn."

He thought that was very funny. He was laughing very quietly as we went down the stairs together.

There was an automatobus waiting outside the driveway to the garage apartments. The shadows of three men waited beside it and their flash beams went on as we approached. In the light I could see the bus rather well. It wasn't an old model, but it was rather beat up, as though its owners considered it nothing but a lump of machinery. Still, I somehow got the impression that it had personality. You may have noticed that look of defensive self-respect hard-used buses get when they grow old before their time. Some of them, anyway. Like old men with gray hair but straight backs. I like to think that's the impression I give.

Gellhorn said in a low voice, "I've got the old fellow. Come on. Move the truck up the drive and let's get started."

One of the others leaned in and punched the proper instructions on the control panel. We moved up the driveway with the bus following submissively.

"It won't go inside the garage," I said. "The door won't take it. We don't have buses here. Only private cars."

"All right," said Gellhorn. "Pull it over onto the grass and keep it out of sight."

I could here the thrumming of the cars when we were still ten yards from the garage. They got noisy sometimes, especially on a fine moonlit night, when any well-tanked, well-greased car

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would enjoy a quick trip on the speedway by moonshine. Once in a while I'd hand out permission to a few as a reward for good behavior, but not often. As a general rule, it was risky. The estate was a large one, but at night it was easy for a high-spirited car to get "lost." I didn't want one to wander into town and start trouble among any busybodies about allowing fifty-one cars to roll about driverless.

Usually they quieted down if I entered the garage. This time they didn't. I think they knew that strangers were about, and once the faces of Gellhorn and the others were visible they got noisier. Each motor was a warm rumble and each motor was knocking irregularly until the place rattled.

The lights went up automatically as we stepped inside. Gellhorn didn't seem bothered by the car noise, but the three men with him looked surprised and uncomfortable. They had the look of the hired thug about them, a look that was not compounded of physical features so much as of a certain wariness of eye and hang-dogness of face. I knew the type and I wasn't worried.

One of them said, "Damn it, they're burning gas."

"My cars always do," I replied stiffly.

"Not tonight," said Gellhorn. "Turn them off."

"It's not that easy, Mr. Gellhorn," I said.

"Get started!" he said.

I stood there. He had his fist gun pointed at me steadily. I said, "I told you, Mr. Gellhorn, that my cars have been well-treated while they've been at the Farm. They're used to being treated that way, and they resent anything else."

"You have one minute," he said. "Lecture me some other time."

"I'm trying to explain something. I'm trying to explain that my cars can understand what I say to them. A positronic motor will learn to do that with time and patience. My cars have learned. Sally understood your proposition two days ago. You'll remember she laughed when I asked her opinion. She also knows what you did to her and so do the two sedans you scattered. And the rest know what to do about trespassers in general."

"Look, you crazy old fool —"

"All I have to say is —" I raised my voice. "Get them!"

One of the men turned pasty and yelled but his voice was drowned completely in the sound of fifty-one horns turned loose at once. They held their notes, and within the four walls of the garage the echoes rose to a wild, metallic call. Two cars rolled forward, not hurriedly, but with no possible mistake as to their target. Two

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cars fell in line behind the first two. All the cars were stirring in their separate stalls.

The thugs stared, then backed.

I shouted, "Don't get up against a wall."

Apparently, they had that instinctive thought themselves. They rushed madly for the door of the garage.

At the door one of Gellhorn's men turned, brought up a fist gun of his own. The needle pellet tore a thin, blue flash toward the first car. The car was Giuseppe.

A thin line of paint peeled up Guiseppe's hood and the right half of his windshield crazed and splintered but did not break through.

The men were out the door, running, and two by two the cars crunched out after them into the night, their horns calling the charge.

I kept my hand on Gellhorn's elbow, but I don't think he could have moved in any case. His lips were trembling.

I said, "That's why I don't need electrified fences or guards. My property protects itself."

Gellhorn's eyes swiveled back and forth in fascination as, pair by pair, they whizzed by. He said, "They're killers!"

"Don't be silly. They won't kill your men."

"They're killers!"

"They'll just give your men a lesson. My cars have been specially trained for cross-country pursuit for just such an occasion, and I think what your men will get will be worse than an outright quick kill. Have you ever been chased by an automatobile?"

Gellhorn didn't answer.

I went on. I didn't want him to miss a thing. "They'll be shadows going no faster than your men, chasing them here, blocking them there, blaring at them, dashing at them, missing with a screech of brake and a thunder of motor. They'll keep it up till your men drop, out of breath and half-dead, waiting for the wheels to crunch over their breaking bones. The cars won't do that. They'll turn away. You can bet, though, that your men will never return here in their lives. Not for all the money you or ten like you could give them. Listen —"

I tightened my hold on his elbow. He strained to hear.

I said, "Don't you hear car doors slamming?"

It was faint and distant, but unmistakable.

He said, "Yes."

I said, "They're laughing. They're enjoying themselves."

His face crumpled with rage. He lifted his hand. He was still holding his fist gun.

I said, "I wouldn't. One automatocar is still with us."

I don't think he had noticed Sally till then. She had moved up

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so quietly. Though her right front fender nearly touched me, I couldn't hear her motor. She might have been holding her breath.

Gellhorn yelled.

I said, "She won't touch you, as long as I'm with you. But if you kill me . . . You know, Sally doesn't like you."

Gellhorn turned the gun in Sally's direction.

"Her motor is shielded," I said, "and before you could ever squeeze the gun a second time she would be on top of you."

"All right, then," he yelled, and suddenly my arm was bent behind my back and twisted so I could hardly stand. He held me between Sally and himself and his pressure didn't let up. "Back out with me and don't try to break loose, old-timer, or I'll tear your arm out of its socket."

I had to move with him. Sally nudged along with us, worried, uncertain what to do. I tried to say something to her and couldn't. I could only clench my teeth and moan.

Gellhorn's automatobus was still standing outside the garage. I was forced in. Gellhorn jumped in after me, locking the doors.

His forehead glistened momentarily, just before the white light pouring out of the garage doors dimmed. His breath frictioned through his nostrils and he mopped at his face.

He said, "All right, now. We'll talk sense."

I was rubbing my arm, trying to get life back into it, and even as I did I was automatically and without any conscious effort studying the control board of the bus.

I said, "This is a rebuilt job."

"So?" he said caustically. "It's a sample of my work. I picked up a discarded chassis, found a brain I could use and spliced me a private bus. What of it?"

I tore at the repair panel, forcing it aside.

He said, "What the hell. Get away from that." The side of his palm came down numbingly on my left shoulder.

I struggled with him. "I don't want to do this bus any harm. What kind of a person do you think I am? I just want to take a look at some of the motor connections."

It didn't take much of a look. I was boiling when I turned to him. I said, "You're a hound and a bastard. You had no right installing this motor yourself. Why didn't you get a robotics man?"

He said, "Do I look crazy?"

"Even if it was a stolen motor, you had no right to treat it so. I wouldn't treat a man the way you treated that motor. Solder, tape, and pinch clamps! It's brutal!"

"It works, doesn't it?"

"Sure it works, but it must be hell for the bus. You could live

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with migraine headaches and acute arthritis, but it wouldn't be much of a life. This car is *suffering.*"

"Shut up!" For a moment he glanced out the window at Sally, who had rolled up as close to the bus as she could. He made sure the doors and windows were locked.

He said. "We're getting out of here now, before the other cars come back. We'll stay away."

"How will that help you?"

"Your cars will run out of gas someday, won't they? You haven't got them fixed up so they can tank up on their own, have you? We'll come back and finish the job."

"They'll be looking for me," I said. "Mrs. Hester will call the police."

He was past reasoning with. He just punched the bus in gear. It lurched forward. Sally followed.

He giggled. "What can she do if you're here with me?"

Sally seemed to realize that, too. She picked up speed, passed us and was gone. Gellhorn opened the window next to him and spat through the opening.

The bus lumbered on over the dark road, its motor rattling unevenly. Gellhorn dimmed the periphery light until the phosphorescent green stripe down the middle of the highway, sparkling in the moonlight, was all that kept us out of the trees. There was virtually no traffic. Two cars passed ours, going the other way, and there were none at all on our side of the highway, either before or behind.

I heard the door-slamming first. Quick and sharp in the silence, first on the right and then on the left. Gellhorn's hands quivered as he punched savagely for increased speed. A beam of light shot out from among a scrub of trees, blinding us. Another beam plunged at us from behind the guard rails on the other side. At a crossover, four hundred yards ahead, there was a sque-e-e-e-e as a car darted across our path.

"Sally went for the rest," I said. "I think you're surrounded."

"So what? What can they do?"

He hunched over the controls, peering through the windshield.

"And don't *you* try anything, old-timer," he muttered.

I couldn't. I was bone-weary and my left arm was on fire. The motor sounds gathered and grew closer. I could hear the motors missing in odd patterns, and suddenly it seemed to me that my cars were speaking to one another.

A medley of horns came from behind. I turned and Gellhorn looked quickly into the rear-view mirror. A dozen cars were following in both lanes.

Gellhorn yelled and laughed madly.

I cried, "Stop! Stop the car!"

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Because not a quarter of a mile ahead, plainly visible in the light beams of two sedans on the roadside was Sally, her trim body plunked square across the road. Two cars shot into the opposite lane to our left, keeping perfect time with us and preventing Gellhorn from turning out.

But he had no intention of turning out. He put his finger on the full-speed-ahead button and kept it there.

He said, "There'll be no bluffing here. This bus outweighs her five to one, old-timer, and we'll just push her off the road like a dead kitten."

I knew he could. The bus was on manual and his finger was on the button. I knew he would.

I lowered the window and stuck my head out. "Sally," I screamed. "Get out of the way. *Sally!*"

It was drowned out in the agonized squeal of maltreated brakebands. I felt myself thrown forward and heard Gellhorn's breath puff out of his body.

I said, "What happened?" It was a foolish question. We had stopped. That was what had happened. Sally and the bus were five feet apart. With five times her weight tearing down on her, she had not budged. The guts of her.

Gellhorn was yanking at the Manual toggle switch. "It's got to," he kept muttering. "It's got to."

I said, "Not the way you hooked up the motor, expert. Any of the circuits could cross over."

He looked at me with a tearing anger and growled deep in his throat. His hair was matted over his forehead. He lifted his fist.

"That's all the advice out of you there'll ever be, old-timer."

And I knew the needle gun was about to fire.

I pressed back against the bus door, watching the fist come up, and when the door opened I went over backward and out, hitting the ground with a thud. I heard the door slam closed again.

I got to my knees and looked up in time to see Gellhorn struggle uselessly with the closing window, then aim his fist quickly through the glass. He never fired. The bus got under way with a tremendous roar and Gellhorn lurched backward.

Sally wasn't in the way any longer, and I watched the bus's rear lights flicker away down the highway.

I was exhausted. I sat down right there, right on the highway, and put my head down in my crossed arms, trying to catch my breath.

I heard a car stop gently at my side. When I looked up, it was Sally. Slowly — lovingly, you might say — her front door opened.

No one had driven Sally for five years — except Gellhorn, of

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course — and I know how valuable such freedom was to a car. I appreciated the gesture, but I said, "Thanks, Sally, but I'll take one of the newer cars."

I got up and turned away, but skillfully and neatly as a pirouette, she wheeled before me again. I couldn't hurt her feelings. I got in. Her front seat had the fine, fresh scent of an automatobile that kept itself spotlessly clean. I lay down across it, thankfully, and with even, silent, and rapid efficiency, my boys and girls brought me home.

Mrs. Hester brought me the copy of the radio transcript the next evening with great excitement.

"It's Mr. Gellhorn," she said. "The man who came to see you."

"What about him?"

I dreaded her answer.

"They found him dead," she said. "Imagine that. Just lying dead in a ditch."

"It might be a stranger altogether," I mumbled.

"Raymond J. Gellhorn," she said, sharply. "There can't be two, can there? The description fits, too. Lord, what a way to die? They found tire marks on his arms and body. Imagine! I'm glad it turned out to be a bus, otherwise they might have come poking around here."

"Did it happen near here?" I asked, anxiously.

"No . . . Near Cooksville. But, goodness, read about it yourself if you — What happened to Giuseppe?"

I welcomed the diversion. Giuseppe was waiting patiently for me to complete the repaint job. His windshield had been replaced.

I said, "Jeremiah! You know."

"Has he been stunting on the speedway again? Why don't you talk to him."

"I have. It doesn't do any good."

After she left, I snatched up the transcript. There was no doubt about it. The doctor reported he had been running and was in a state of totally spent exhaustion. I wondered for how many miles the bus had played with him before the final lunge. The transcript had no notion of anything like that, of course.

They had located the bus and identified it by the tire tracks. The police had it and were trying to trace its ownership.

There was an editorial in the transcript about it. It had been the first traffic fatality in the state for that year and the paper warned strenuously against manual driving after night.

There was no mention of Gellhorn's three thugs and for that, at least, I was grateful. None of our cars had been seduced by the pleasure of the chase into killing.

That was all. I let the paper

(*Continued on page 162*)

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GUEST ARTIST

By ROGER DEE

"Me? I'm Dave Wilson, the sheriff here in Bog City. Town's just a whistle-stop, as you might say, and the only crime wave we have in these parts is some out-of-towner breaking our speed laws, or maybe a little moonshinin' over in Coot Swamp. Otherwise things go along nice as you please, no excitement and none wanted.

"Least that's the way it was till this pint-sized artist showed up at Arvie Moss's service station that morning. At first no one thought much about it, except to comment on his bad manners. But when murder and arson and kidnaping started happening . . . well, the coincidence was just too strong for folks to swallow. . . ."

On Thursday night there was a bright flash of blue light out in the middle of Coot Swamp. The next morning Vail Bond showed up in Bog City, four miles away.

Several people saw the flash from a distance and everybody saw Vail Bond, but at first it never occurred to anybody to connect the two. Not even to me, and it's my business as sheriff of Cotton County to check on suspicious coincidences. A part of what happened later was told to me by others involved — Clint Harmon and George McClure and

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Letitia Dunne, mainly — but it'll be easier to tell if I stick to first person in the telling, especially since I was on hand to see most of it.

Clint Harmon was the only man to see the flash close up and talk about it later. Clint is a big, slow farmer in his late thirties who works a quarter-section of cotton and sugar cane three miles out of town, and who acts as my deputy when I need one. Coot Swamp is about a mile past his place on the highway, which partly explains why he saw the flash.

His main reason for seeing it so close up was that he had picked up Reese Tanner on his way home that Thursday night, and was giving him a lift out to the shack where Reese lived — if you could call it living — at the edge of the swamp. According to what Clint told me later, he had just pulled his pickup truck off the highway to let Reese out at the side-road leading down to his shack when it happened.

The sky ahead of them lit up with a glare like a million flash bulbs going off at once.

The flash blinded both men for a couple of minutes, and when their sight came back there was nothing to be seen but the dark huddle of the swamp with its cypresses and live-oaks. There was no sound of an explosion; Clint was positive about that.

He killed his pickup motor and they sat there for a while in the soft spring darkness, listening to the big bass bullfrogs and the little treble tree-frogs and the whip-poorwills crying out in the swamp. I know just how it was, because the same thing happened to me later: all at once the swamp seemed a lot bigger and more mysterious than it really is, and the damp dead-leaf smell of it on the warm April wind was like something's breath.

Reese Tanner looked at Clint out of the edges of his eyes.

"That flash was square in the middle of the swamp," he said. "You got any idea who it is or how they got there, Clint?"

Clint didn't, and said so.

He knew what Reese was thinking, of course. Everybody knew that Reese Tanner made an occasional run of moonshine whisky out in Coot Swamp, but nobody ever proved it because nobody else ever found a way through the quicksand bogs and suckholes without being pulled under. And nobody ever kicked about it, because Reese wasn't a troublesome sort for a swamp-rat and never sold enough of his white lightning to make trouble.

"Then if it ain't the law," Reese said, "I reckon I better ease out there and see who it *is*."

Clint figured that some of the local sharecroppers or tobacco field hands had found a way

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through the swamp to Reese's still, and Reese must have had the same idea. But neither of them said so; that was Reese's business.

So Clint backed his pickup truck onto the highway again and drove home, wondering a little about what could have caused so bright a flash without making any noise. He never guessed for a minute that he wouldn't see Reese Tanner alive again.

I was down at Arvie Moss' service station the next morning, talking to Arvie while he pumped gas into my jeep, when this Vail Bond strolled in.

Clint Harmon had called me earlier to report the blue flash in Coot Swamp, and I was telling Arvie about it just to see what sort of screwball theory he would dream up to explain it. To explain *that*, I'd better say now that Arvie was always a great one for reading paper-backed fantasy and science-fiction books, and is the world's greatest sucker for flying saucer stories and weird mysteries in general. Some of the conclusions he jumps at would fair curl your hair.

Neither of us paid any particular attention to this stranger until we went inside the station to charge my jeep's gas to the county, and found him looking the place over. He didn't bother to introduce himself, but it was plain enough at a glance that he wasn't an ordinary one. The Greyhound bus had just pulled out after its regular fifteen-minute rest-stop — Arvie's gas station does duty for a bus terminal in Bog City, and makes out well enough for a town of twelve hundred people — so we figured at first that this stranger was a passenger who had stayed too long in the men's room and had got left behind.

If I'd known then that he wasn't I'd have been more careful; I'd have pegged him as a hitchhiker, and some of the ones that drift through here will bear watching. He was swinging a slender black cane in one hand and holding a little foot-square traveling case in the other, smiling a little in a patronizing sort of way and looking down his nose as if he owned the place and us with it. He was on the small side — maybe five-feet eight and weighing around one-thirty — and he was wearing a hard-finish brown suit that hadn't been cut within a thousand miles of Bog City. He didn't have a hat, and his hair was thick and black and curly. His face was the sort that goes with that kind of hair, but usually only on movie screens — pale and composed, with flashing dark eyes and a thin-bridged, aristocratic nose.

He was the handsomest man I ever saw, but it wasn't his looks

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that caught my eye. It was the *air* of him. You didn't have to look twice to see that he was dead sure of himself and that he was used to having things his own way.

"Bus leave you behind?" Arvie asked, half curious and half sympathetic. "You got a wait ahead of you, mister. Next one won't come through till 3:40 this afternoon."

The stranger didn't answer his question. Instead, he said quick and sharp, making it an order: "I shall stay in this place for some days. Direct me to an hotel at once."

His tone turned Arvie a bright, turkey red.

Arvie's a good enough kid in his way, but somehow touchiness always seems to go along with imagination, and Arvie has his share of both. You'd have thought his three years in the Army, two of them spent in Korea, would have taught him not to expect from strangers the sort of easy, taken-for-granted courtesy he grew up with in Bog City, but they hadn't.

"We don't have a regular hotel in town," I said, speaking before Arvie could blow his top. "Nearest thing to one is Mrs. Bender's boarding house. That's three blocks down Main Street, catty-corner across from Wilkins' Drug Store."

The stranger looked me over with a quick flick of his eyes. It didn't bother me, because I was used to it and I knew exactly what he saw: a hick whistlestop sheriff named Dave Wilson, fat and fifty, wearing faded ducks and bifocals and an old felt hat full of holes from dry-fly lures.

His face sort of twitched. I couldn't describe the expression if I died for it, but it was closer to a sneer than to a smile.

"Emblem of office," he said, when his eyes touched my silver star. "An Orderman. How ridiculous."

I'd heard the same tone from some women putting their servants in their places, and from some hunters calling their dogs to heel. It got under my skin; I felt my face getting hot, and the only thing that kept me from losing my own temper was Arvie's sudden snicker.

It was plain enough that the stranger didn't care what I thought. He turned his back on me to stare up at the wall calendar over Arvie's cigarette machine — the usual sort of advertising calendar put out by the auto-parts dealers, with a minimum-sized sheaf of date leaves under a streamlined Bikini bathing beauty — as if he'd never seen anything like it in his life.

"You like her better, maybe," Arvie said, grinning. "Or don't they grow a nice hunk of woman

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like that where you come from?"

The little guy stiffened. "Execrable execution," he said, clipping the words off short and sharp. Which isn't easy. Try saying it quick yourself some time. "But obviously exaggerated here" — he touched the picture, tap-tap-tap, with his cane — "and here and here."

That was when Letitia Dunne came in.

The three of us turned at the sound of her entrance, and there she was — the prettiest woman in the country, the brainiest and the wealthiest and the sharpest-tongued. And a dead ringer, if she had shucked off the stiff white summer dress and her shell-rimmed glasses and let down her prim school-teacherish hairdo, for the Bikini girl on the calendar.

"Error," said the stranger, looking her up and down with his quick stare. "Execution is execrable, but not exaggerated."

Arvie and I held our breaths and waited for Letitia to cut him down to size, the way she always did with traveling Romeos, and we got a shock when he didn't. She just stood there looking him over in return and frowning a little, and it was plain enough that she wasn't seeing in him what Arvie and I saw.

But if she wouldn't resent his tone, Arvie would.

"Look, Handsome," he said, coming around me. "You want to watch that tongue of yours. It'll get you in trouble!"

I might have let him hang one on the guy if I hadn't been too curious about Letitia Dunne's reaction. She hadn't said a word yet, which wasn't standard for Letitia.

"I have no need to withhold opinion," the stranger said, clipping his words short and drawing himself up to his full five-foot-eight. "I am an artist. I interpret as is seen; it is why I am here."

That did it. Letitia is an authority on art and music and economics and education and God knows what else, and the idea of having a real artist in Bog City lit her up like an arc light.

"An artist *here?*" she said. "For Heaven's sake, why?"

"He's looking for a hotel," I said. "I directed him to Mrs. Bender's place, but he probably won't like it."

Letitia gave me a sniff that dismissed me forever.

"If you'll put your bag in my car," she told the stranger, "I'll be happy to give you a lift. Though if you're going to do any serious work here, I'm sure you'll have to find more suitable surroundings than Mrs. Bender's."

He didn't even look back — he just swung that little bag of his into Letitia's convertible and got in beside her. I may have imagined it, but it seemed to me

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that he fiddled with the door handle on his side for a couple of seconds, as if he'd never seen one before.

We watched them roll away down Main Street. An uneasy hunch nagged at me, but I couldn't identify it until Arvie spoke up.

"Boy, boy," he said. "Wait'll George hears about this!"

That was it, of course. For half his life George McClure had trailed after Letitia, counting out the time she had spent at college and the three or four years George had put up in the Navy, and a civil word from Letitia to him was what an Oscar is to a movie star. He'd had a clear field until now, such as it was, because Letitia had even less use for other men around Bog City than she had for George, who was at least handy.

"He'll hear," I said. "And it'll hit him right between the eyes."

Arvie made a disgusted noise. "Serve him right, Dave. He should have dropped that opinionated icicle years ago."

But a minute later he said with a dreamy look in his eye: "If she ever does wake up and slide down off her high horse, though, some guy is going to have his hands full. . . ."

Somebody drove in for gas then and Arvie went out to the pump. I drove my jeep down Main Street to the Elite Eatery and had breakfast before taking a tray over to my vagrant, who had the jail's single cell to himself and was taking life easy.

After that, Friday was just another day. Until five o'clock, that is, when it turned into a nightmare.

You know how talk gets around a town the size of Bog City; the place was buzzing from the moment this artist showed up, and for once it had something to buzz about. Gossip brought me up to date on Vail Bond, and kept me posted whether I wanted to be posted or not.

He was a real cosmopolitan, born in Turkey of English parents who had spent their lives in diplomatic service, educated and brought up in Morocco, Siam, Greece, Indo China and any other place on the globe you could name. Letitia, showing him off to her friends around town, had the whole story. His art work was beginning to attract considerable notice, she said, and he had come to tour the States before settling down to a serious career of painting.

It turned out that I had been right about Bond's reaction to Mrs. Bender's boarding house. He didn't like it, and told her so — it was inefficient, primitive, disgustingly public and altogether unsatisfactory. Mrs. Bender and her cronies of the Camellia Grower's Club were up in arms about that, but of course the other fe-

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male faction in town, the Azalea Admirers' Association, took the opposite stand and backed Letitia and her artist to the hilt. From the way they gushed over this esthetic runt, you'd have thought he was Michelangelo himself.

Letitia solved his lodgings problem by putting him up in the studio cottage her father had built for her before he died back in 1946. It was an ideal place for an artist, she said, since it had what she called a north-light, and because the magnolias and the big abelia hedges screened it from the old Colonial Dunne house and gave it privacy.

Letitia was having a wonderful time. For the first time in her life she had met a man — and a handsome one, too — who knew more than she did and who didn't mind saying so. It was something completely new to her experience, and she ate it up.

George McClure's opinion of the artist was something else again, but I didn't get that until later. The balance of Friday was taken up with something more mysterious and a damned sight more serious than a pansy paint-slinger and his tanktown triangle.

The trouble started just as I got back to my jail office from Henry Timms' barber shop, where I'd been getting a shave. Arvie Moss called me on the telephone and relayed a message from Clint Harmon, who hadn't been able to reach me because Henry's barber shop doesn't have a phone and the operator hadn't been able to track me down.

"Clint's found a body out on his place," Arvie said. His words stumbled over each other in his excitement, and I could imagine the curiosity boiling around in his head like bubbles in a pot of cornmeal mush. "It's down in his river-bottom cane field, he says. Wouldn't tell me anything else, but he wants you quick."

I didn't like the sound of it. A found body usually means murder, and the smaller the town you live in the uglier the word sounds.

"Better not lose any time," Arvie urged. "Clint was pretty much upset, and you know Clint."

I did know Clint. A calmer, easier-going man never lived; if he had a nerve in his body no one ever knew where it was. They didn't come any steadier or more reliable than Clint, and if he was excited . . .

"On my way," I said, and hung up.

When I drove by Arvie's station on my way out, he had locked up the place and was hanging a charge pad on the gas pump. "If anybody wants gas," he said, swinging into the jeep beside me, "they can help themselves."

I was tempted to throw him out, but didn't because the chances

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were I'd have to load up a corpse for the trip back and I could use some help.

We found Clint Harmon waiting for us at the junction where the highway and his field road intersected. He rode down to his sugar cane bottoms with us without saying anything, just sucking away on his pipe and frowning. He showed me where to stop, and when I pulled up the jeep he got out and gave me a funny look.

"I tractored that field and dragged it smooth two days ago," he said. "You can see my tracks all the way out to the body and back. But there ain't any other signs around, Dave. None at all."

He was right. We went out to the body which lay near the middle of the field, and except for Clint's tracks there wasn't another mark to be seen. Not even a fox or coon sign.

The body was sprawled out stiffly on the loose, fresh dirt, a black and awkward bundle that didn't look as if it had ever been human. It was burned from head to foot, charred past any chance of recognition; nothing was left of its clothes but a few scorched and blackened rags.

It just happened that one of those rags, when we turned the body over, had a pocket in it, and in the pocket was a bone-handled jackknife with a little silver plate on one side. I'd have known that knife at sight even without the initials R.T. on the plate.

"It's Reese Tanner," I said.

For the first time since telling Arvie about it, I remembered the blue flash Clint had seen in Coot Swamp the night before. Hunches are funny things — there wasn't a scrap of evidence to connect Reese Tanner's death with that flash, but all at once I was as certain of it as if I'd seen it happen.

Clint and Arvie looked sideways at each other when I said so. I could see that Arvie was four or five theories ahead of me, as usual, but Clint was just plain puzzled.

"You mean there might have been another explosion in the swamp and it blew Reese out here?" He squinted at the swamp, which was close to a mile away, and shook his head. "Uh-uh, Dave. There wouldn't have been even this much left of him. And we'd have heard the boom, sure."

"I don't mean it blew him out here, damn it," I snapped, not knowing just what I did mean and feeling testy because of it.

They looked at each other again.

"One thing sure," Clint said, sidestepping argument, "is that we'll have the devil of a time finding out what *did* happen out there. Nobody but Reese ever got in and out of Coot Swamp without being sucked down a

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boghole, and you won't find a man in Cotton County who'll risk it."

"Chances are he wasn't killed in there at all," I said, trying to be logical. "Nobody could have packed him out, anyway. Question is how the hell did he get burned like this, and who brought him here?"

Arvie's face lit up like a pinball machine, which meant he'd reached his own conclusions as to what had happened. Clint just shook his big tow head and look puzzled.

"It ain't the who of it that throws me," he said. "It's the *how*."

We did our best to figure out the how of it, but ended up every time where we started — with Reese Tanner's charred body.

We gave it up finally and loaded the body into the back of my jeep. The three of us rode together in front as far as the highway intersection, where Clint got out. I said so long and was about to drive on when Clint squared off like a man coming to a tough decision and said, "Wait up, Dave. I didn't tell you all of it. This is going to sound crazy as hell, but it may mean something."

I cut the jeep's motor. "All right, let's have it. I knew all along that something was bothering you."

Clint looked uncomfortable, ducking his head and scrubbing his brogans in the dust like a kid caught stealing watermelons.

"Something flew over my place last night," he blurted out. "About eleven o'clock, maybe half an hour after I left Reese Tanner at his shack. I was smoking a pipe on my front porch before turning in —"

I'd have laughed at a yarn like that from Arvie Moss, because anything fantastic is Arvie's meat, from flying saucers to frog showers. But Clint was a different sort. If he said something flew over, then it had.

"You mean it came over high like a plane, or low like a bat?"

"Neither one," Clint said. "I couldn't see too well because there wasn't any moon last night, but this thing was about a hundred feet up and it looked to be about twice as big as I am. It wasn't really flying, not flapping or buzzing anyway. It sort of sailed, and it was crying."

Crying?

The late afternoon sun was hot enough to raise blisters on the asphalt, but a shiver ran down my spine like a sudden trickle of ice water. "What the hell do you mean, crying?"

"Whimpering would be more like it, I guess," Clint said doggedly. "Or whining. Not loud, but steady. Whatever it was, it floated over my place and disappeared, and the crying went with it."

The three of us looked at each

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other for a minute without saying anything. Then Arvie let out his breath with a grunt.

"Which way did it go, Clint?"

"It came up from the swamp," Clint said. "And it went that way. Across my cane bottoms, toward Bog City."

I was in a brown study all the way back to town, but Arvie was wound up like a kid at his first ball game. All the wild plots he'd ever read in those paper-backed books of his were boiling around in his head like home-brew mash, and pretty soon they started fizzing out.

"You know what's behind this, Dave?" he burst out, gripping my knee in his excitement. "There's a space ship of some kind out there in Coot Swamp, maybe one of these flying saucers. It's landing jets made the blue flash Clint saw. And whoever — or *whatever* — set it down there didn't want its location known, so they — *it* — killed Reese Tanner and dumped his body outside the swamp. Dave, this is the first authentic —"

I stopped the jeep in the middle of the highway and glared at him.

"You start spreading that sort of crap around town," I said, meaning every word of it, "and I'll throw you in jail for malicious mischief and false report and disturbing the peace. Flying saucers — hell — it's a wonder you don't try to blame it on vampires!"

Arvie looked superior. "No such things as vampires, Dave. That's all superstition. But if it's not a space ship out there, then what is it? You know Clint Harmon too well to think he'd make a mistake. And you don't think he'd lie about what he saw, do you?"

One reason I'd jumped Arvie so hard was because the only logical answer to that question had already occurred to me, and it upset me worse than a flying saucer would have. The only tracks leading to or from Reese Tanner's body had been Clint's, and the only possible way Reese could have got where we found him was for Clint to have carried him there and dumped him.

That's the way impartial logic would have it, but Clint hadn't killed Reese Tanner. In the first place he'd had nothing against Reese, and in the second he wouldn't have handled a murder that way. Clint would have had better sense than to leave a plain trail pointing to no one but himself.

And in the third place Clint couldn't have dreamed up a story like the one he'd told about the crying thing that flew over his place the night before. A man with a lot of nerve usually has mighty little imagination, and Clint's courage and imagination would stack up at a ratio of

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about ninety-nine to one.

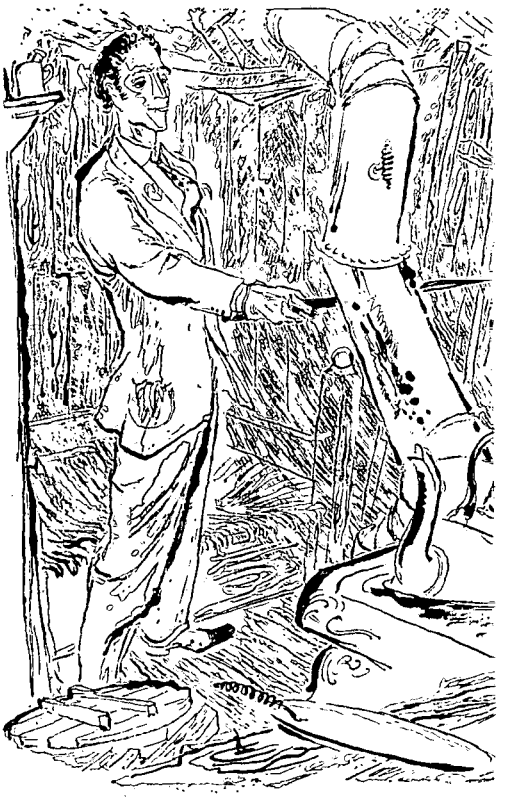
But if Clint hadn't put the body there, then who had? And why, and how?

Arvie kept quiet the rest of the way to town, but I could see him sorting it all out in his head and adding it up. And when I dropped him at his station, he floored me by making the only practical suggestion I'd heard, one I should have thought of already.

"I'd doubt my own eyes before I'd doubt Clint's," he said. "Dave, he *did* see something flying over his place last night, and whatever it was dropped Reese's body there. Why not find out if anybody in this part of the country is using a helicopter and see if you can't wangle one for yourself to explore Coot Swamp? It's the only way you'll ever get in and out of the place."

He was right. I could get the information from the CAA, and the state police could arrange the loan of a helicopter.

But when I thought it over, the idea didn't sound too promising. Helicopters are scarcer than the newspapers would have you think, and they're noisier than the thing Clint had heard. I've read enough war stories to know that they're hard to handle, too, and what would an experienced pilot have to do with a moonshining swamp-rat like Reese Tanner?



It was the only lead I had, though. I drove by Morton Jones' undertaking parlor and turned over to him what was left of Reese, and then I went back to my office at the jail and made a couple of out-of-town phone calls, one to the CAA and the other to the Highway Patrol Headquarters at the state capital.

Red tape delayed me at both places, of course. My requests would be referred to officials in

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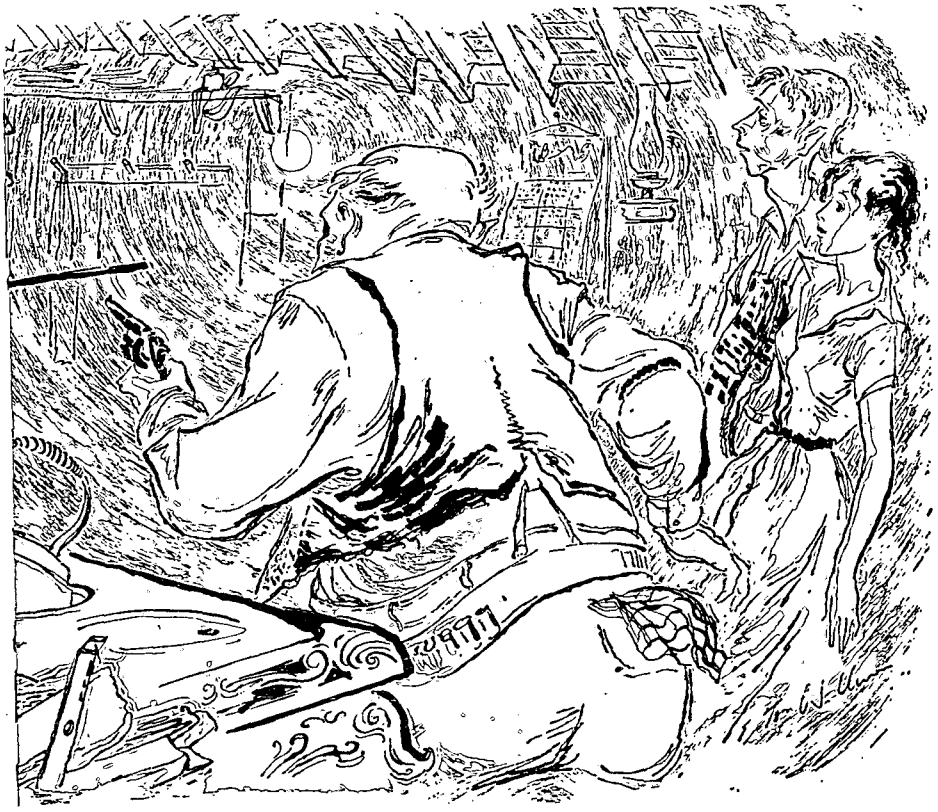

charge who would call me later.

I didn't feel up to answering the fool questions people would be asking about the murder if I ate supper as usual at the Elite Eatery, so I brought two trays instead of one back to the jail.

I was eating my own supper in the office when George McClure came in.

George had had a rough day, and looked it.

You wouldn't think a big solid fellow like George could be so completely crushed in one day by one woman, but his defeat couldn't have shown plainer if it had been stamped on his face in three-inch print.

"Didn't expect you around tonight," I said, knowing exactly how it was with him but feeling just low enough myself to prod him a little. "Figured you'd have a date with Letitia."

"I did," George said miserably. "But she forgot it in the excite-

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ment. Can't blame her for that."

He sat down across the desk from me and looked neglected. "Dave, I never saw Letty so taken with a man before. You think it's really serious?"

I said I thought it might be, depending on how much of this artist's arrogance Letitia was willing to put up with.

"Arrogance," George said, "is a good word for it. I went around to see Letty this afternoon, and she and Mrs. Dunne were getting this little jerk settled in Letty's studio cottage. They were fussing over him like a pair of hens, and he was handing back nothing but criticism. I never wanted to hang one on a man so bad in my life, Dave, but I couldn't. You know Letty."

"Did you find out anything more about this Bond?" I asked. "Anything more than the usual gossip, I mean."

"Enough to know I don't want him fooling around with Letty," George said unhappily. "He made a lecture to Letty's Azalea Admirers' Association as soon as they'd got him settled in the cottage, and I had to sit through it to get a chance to talk to Letty afterward. He didn't talk about art; said it was obvious that his audience wouldn't appreciate advanced discussion of esthetic mediums, so he'd speak on bionomics instead.

"He was so sure of himself that he sort of scared me, Dave. According to him, our present culture is a blind alley of ignorant tradition, but he claims that some of us are taking a trend toward logical adaptation to our environment. That's the way I remember it, at least. Some of the points he made would keep you awake nights."

He quoted me a few of them, and I could see his point.

According to Bond, the root of our present-day confusion was the mistaken idea that personal privacy is a right rather than a privilege. Every citizen, he said, should be subject to mental cross-examination as often as the public good demanded, and the politically responsible in particular. Democracy would make way in time for a modified socialism sparked by an intelligent minority. Monogamy, responsible for most of our social and moral delinquencies, would disappear. . . .

"Letty says his IQ is clear out of sight," George finished gloomily. "According to her, he's a hundred years ahead of —"

Two interruptions cut him short: the telephone rang, and Arvie Moss came in. I answered the phone, of course — Arvie we have with us always.

It was the Colonel of Troopers at state headquarters. The CAA had referred my request to him, along with the information I wanted. There was no record of

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any helicopter operating in my county. The only ones in the state outside Army posts, for that matter, were a couple allotted to the Forestry Department. Yes, he could arrange the loan of one to my office if the emergency justified the trouble, but my reasons for asking had better be good.

"I'll send the whizzer down first thing tomorrow morning," the Colonel said when I told him. "But get this: I'm picking a pilot I can trust to make sure it's used for manhunting and not for crop-dusting. And God help you, Wilson, if you wreck it. Cotton County will double its taxes for the next ten years to pay for it!"

I hung up with my ears burning.

Arvie, who had been listening to my conversation like a bird dog on point, jumped me the second the phone was cradled.

"Better keep it quiet about the helicopter, Dave. I've been checking around town since we brought Reese in, and —"

Ordinarily I'm pretty even tempered, but I don't like mysteries that go over my head. I don't like State Patrol officers giving me hell, and I don't like being badgered in my own office by a screwball fanatic like Arvie Moss.

"You stay out of this," I told him. "Go sell somebody a quart of oil. I'll handle this in my own way. I'm telling you, Arvie!"

The telephone rang again.

It was Letitia Dunne, and she was in a state. Jason, her big Airedale, had gone mad, tried to tear her guest to pieces, and then had disappeared. She wanted me to start an immediate search for him before he could attack somebody else.

"You're sure he's rabid?" I asked.

Jason was one of a pair that Clint Harmon had raised from pups; George McClure had bought one of them for Letitia and Clint had kept the other, a female named Queenie, on his farm. I'd as soon have faced a hungry tiger as either of those rough-coated brutes, and to meet one of them in the open with a mad fit on —

Letitia was sure. Jason hadn't hurt Bond, but that wasn't Jason's fault — he'd tried hard enough. He had been out most of the day, scouring the fields for rabbits the way dogs will, and had come home only a few minutes ago. He had sniffed around the place for a while, bristling and growling, and the moment he saw Vail Bond he had chased him into the studio cottage and ripped the door and window-screens to ribbons trying to get at him. No, Letitia hadn't seen which way Jason went. He'd run away, disappeared, before she could get help down to the cottage. He could be any place.

"I'll put out the word on him," I promised her. "And if we don't

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locate him tonight we'll spot him quick enough tomorrow. I'm getting a heli —"

Arvie yelled at me from the doorway, scaring me half out of my skin. "Don't tell her about the helicopter — you'll ruin everything!"

I gave him a dirty look and righted the chair I'd kicked over when I jumped up.

"What was that about going to hell, Dave Wilson?" Letitia demanded ominously. "What's going on down there? Are you drunk?"

I told her what was up. We'd be scouting Coot Swamp tomorrow in the helicopter, looking for clues to Reese Tanner's murder, and we'd keep an eye out for Jason at the same time. It ought to be easy enough to spot him from the air.

When Letitia hung up I took time out to give Arvie Moss hell. I started to, rather. Unexpectedly, George defended him.

"Maybe you ought to hear what Arvie has to say, Dave. He just might have something."

"It's probably too late now that Letitia knows about the helicopter," Arvie grumbled. "She'll tell that phony artist and he'll run for it before the whizzer gets here. You'll see."

He was going too fast for me. "How do you mean, phony?"

"I've been doing some sleuthing of my own," Arvie said. "And the way Jason went after Vail Bond ties right in with everything I learned. Look, he came here with a pat story and a background spread over half the world, and neither of them can be checked. How can you trace a man's past when he's lived everywhere from Morocco to Indo China, or claims he did?"

I put my feet on the desk and packed my pipe, getting set for another of Arvie's brainstorms.

"Let me guess," I said. "The guy's an international jewel thief, and he's got the crown jewels of Pakistan in that little bag of his. Or is it dope this time, Arvie?"

"Neither," Arvie said. Sarcasm didn't faze him. "I talked to that Greyhound bus driver this evening when he came through again on his return trip, and he swore up and down that he never left anybody behind here this morning. That phony artist didn't come here by bus, Dave. He *walked* in."

For the life of me I couldn't see what he was leading up to, so I took the bait — hook, line and sinker.

"Walked in? From where?"

"From Coot Swamp," Arvie said.

That did it.

"You crazy jerk," I yelled, jumping up and kicking over my chair again. "If you think I'm going to sit here and listen to you

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build that half-pint pansy into a menace from Mars —"

Arvie dodged behind George McClure, who surprised me by sticking up for him again. "Take it easy, Dave. Nobody said the guy comes from Mars. Let's hear the rest of it."

"There's plenty more," Arvie said over George's shoulder. "I talked to Henry Timms at the barber shop before I saw the bus driver — that's what first made me suspicious. Henry got a good look at this Bond when Letitia was showing him around town this morning. You know how a man notices details connected with his trade, the way you notice another peace officer's way of working or I notice a new service station setup — and he says the guy don't shave. Get this: Henry swears the guy *never* had any whiskers, because his skin doesn't have any hair follicles."

"So he's a freak," I said. "And probably he's as funny as a four-dollar bill in the bargain. But what's that got to do with Coot Swamp and Reese Tanner's murder?"

"Don't rush me," Arvie said, protesting. "I talked to Mrs. Dunne's cook at the grocery, and I asked some questions of the waitress at the Elite Eatery. This guy Bond hasn't eaten a bite since he hit Bog City, unless it came out of that midget traveling bag."

"He could be on a diet," I pointed out. "Arvie, why don't you let me handle this? Give your imagination a rest before it backfires on you!"

George McClure was trying to be impersonal, but I could see he was hoping that something off-color would come out on this Bond. "I'm not necessarily backing Arvie's theory," he said. "But it's worth looking into. Whatever it is, it ought to be checked."

"You'll see I'm right when you get into Coot Swamp with that helicopter," Arvie said. "But it'll be too late then. The space ship will be gone, and this fake artist with it. He's probably on his way there right now, or will be as soon as he hears from Letitia that you've got a whizzer coming down to scout that bog."

I might have known it. That damned Arvie and his screwball science-fiction plots!

"Here's the way it shapes up," Arvie ticked it off. "These aliens set their ship down out there where nobody could get to it, and they sent Bond out to scout the country for an invasion from their own planet. That little bag of his has got an antigravity unit in it that flies him in and out of the swamp to his ship, and his black cane is really a heat-ray rod. He killed Reese Tanner with it and dumped him on Clint's sugar cane field. Murder wouldn't bother aliens like that; they probably feel about us the way we'd feel about

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a tribe of monkeys. They may not even be humanoid — Bond may be a robot, disguised as a man. That would explain why he never shaves or eats. He may be —"

"You," I said, fishing the key to my jail cell out of my desk, "may be a potential jailbird, Arvie Moss. If you're not out of here in ten seconds, I'm going to charge you with interfering with an officer in performance of his duty and throw you in the cooler with that hitch-hiking vagrant. Get!"

Arvie got. "You'll wish you'd listened before this is over," he said at the door. "I wouldn't want to be in your shoes when —"

The telephone interrupted him. I scooped up the receiver and Clint Harmon's voice hit me in the ear before I could say hello.

"Dave, the thing just flew over my place again and I took a shot at it and winged it. It went down toward Reese Tanner's shack. I'm going after it!"

Here I'd been fretting all day because I wasn't getting anywhere with this crazy case, and now everything had to happen at once. Clint's voice was still ringing in my ear when somebody dashed past the jail in the dark, yelling "*Fire!*" at the top of his lungs.

The emergency bell at the court house started bonging like mad for volunteers. A scatter of other voices took up the cry: "*Fire, fire!*"

"You hear that?" Arvie demanded. "It's the Dunne house!"

He went out at a run with George McClure, leaving me stuttering into the telephone: "Be down as quick as I can. The Dunne house —"

I was talking to a dead wire. Clint had hung up.

A big-city fire crew might have saved the Dunne house, but our handful of volunteers with their push-pump didn't have a chance.

By the time I stopped my jeep on the front lawn, flames had completely gutted the lower floor and were shooting out the second-story windows. The heat was terrific; there was a great roaring and crackling and showering of sparks and an acrid smell of smoke and scorching magnolia leaves. One of the big fluted veranda columns went down with a crash just as I pulled up, driving the crowd back in a wild rush.

George McClure charged out of the confusion and grabbed my arm. His eyes were wild in the leaping firelight; and half his eyebrows were singed away.

"I went — through the house," he panted. "Nobody inside. Mrs. Dunne says Letty — at studio when it — started."

I could see him remembering Arvie's theory about the artist then, and the force of it staggered him. He wheeled and ran down the slope toward the rear of the burning house, heading for the

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little studio cottage nestling behind its concealing abelia hedges. I went after him, and from somewhere Arvie Moss popped out of the crowd and joined me.

The two of us stormed into the cottage together and found George there ahead of us. The place was empty except for the charred body of a big dog lying on the studio rug, its grinning teeth and part of its skull showing white through blackened flesh.

I remember thinking stupidly: *At least I won't have to beat the brush for a rabid dog. Jason's accounted for.*

"Poor old fellow wasn't mad," Arvie said. "He smelled that phony artist out for the alien he is, and Bond killed him with his heat-ray and dragged his body in here. That's why Letty thought Jason had run away."

I didn't argue the point. I was too busy wondering if Letitia might have walked into the cottage and found Bond getting ready to fly away with Jason's body. If she had —

I snapped out of it, cursing Arvie Moss for putting the idea into my head.

"Letitia's all right," I told George, who stood in a daze with his big shoulders slumped and his face white with shock. "She and Bond probably went for a ride. They'll be back as soon as they hear about the fire."

He shook his head without looking up. "Her car's in the garage. I saw it."

"Then they're in Coot Swamp by now," Arvie predicted. "That devil fired the house with his heat-ray to make a diversion, and he's running for his space ship with Letitia as a hostage. I warned you not to tell Letitia about that helicopter!"

I remembered Clint's phone call then and cursed myself again for forgetting it. If Arvie was right . . .

"*Letty*," George groaned when I told him what Clint had said. "She may be hurt, Dave. We've got to get down there!"

We ran out of the cottage and through the gaping crowd and piled into my jeep. I had to make one stop at the jail to pick up my gun, which I never carry unless I have a particular reason, and that stop turned up another complication that was just about the last straw.

The cell door was open and my prisoner was gone.

We reached Clint's place three minutes later and found the house dark and still. Queenie, Clint's big Airedale and the mate to Jason, came running out to meet us and howled when the tether rope at her collar jerked her back. She growled and bristled like a wolf until she recognized my smell; after that she'd have climbed into the jeep with me if I had cut her free.

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"Clint will be down at the swamp, beating the brush," I said, thinking out loud. "Let's go!"

It was funny, in a way. Knowing something of what Clint might be up against down there in the dark sent a prickle down my back; but at the same time I almost felt sorry for Vail Bond. Man or monster, whatever he might be, the chances were that he'd never been up against a hunter as cool or as relentless as Clint.

I put the jeep into gear and we went barrelling on through the darkness for another mile, down the highway to the dirt side road that led to Coot Swamp. We didn't drive all the way to Reese Tanner's shack; Clint might have his quarry holed up down there, I thought, and it wouldn't help matters any if we rushed in and fouled things up for him.

I'll never forget the moment when we got out of the jeep and stood together in the darkness, straining our ears against the night quiet and wondering what was happening. The wind blew soft and warm from the swamp; the smell of it was like a rank, animal breath. The moon was long down, taking the night-birds and the whippoorwills with it. There wasn't a sound except the faint *crick-crack* of the jeep's motor cooling off and the endless familiar *groonk, groonk, groonk* of the big green frogs out in the swamp.

We spotted Reese Tanner's shack, a shapeless huddle in the deeper darkness of the live-oaks that fringed the swamp, by the lantern-glow of its window. The door opened while we watched and Clint Harmon looked out, framed against a crooked rectangle of yellow light. He must have heard our motor, I remember thinking, and was trying to spot us.

"Clint!" I yelled. "Are you all right? Did you find the —"

I could see his head bob. "Got it," he called. "Come on in."

George put a hand on my shoulder in the dark, and I could feel him trembling. I knew what was eating him, and I understood how hard it was for him to ask the question.

"Is Letitia there?" I called, asking it for him.

Clint's answering voice said, "She's here. Come on down."

I should have known better. I realized that a moment later, but just then my gnawing curiosity to see what Clint had in the shack drove caution out of my mind.

We piled into the shack — and Clint, moving like a mechanical man, slammed the door shut behind us. His face was loose and empty, but behind the blankness of his eyes I read a torment that told me he was fighting the hardest battle of his life and was losing.

Letitia stood in a corner of the room, her prim white dress rum-

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pled and her efficient hairdo wildly touseled. Her face was as smooth and vacant as Clint's, but the same look of struggling horror was in her eyes. I had the creepy feeling that she might have looked the same way if she were drowning in a vat of something cold and thick and slimy . . . alien.

They were like a pair of sleepwalkers, hypnotized or worse. I realized that even before I saw the little pearly bubble of light that hung, humming, in the center of the room. It was about as big as a tennis ball, but its size is the only thing I can describe; I had a screwy conviction that it was tremendously larger than it looked, but that at the same time the elements of whatever mechanism was inside it graded down to a shimmering microscopic complexity. . . .

Looking full at the thing was a mistake — in the turn of a hand I was under its spell as deeply as Clint and Letitia. George and Arvie had frozen on either side of me, and when neither of them moved again I understood that it had caught them, too. I didn't black out, but all at once I didn't seem to have a body any more — there was no floor against my feet, no rub of clothing against my skin, and somehow I knew that the body I couldn't feel wouldn't answer to me again until Vail Bond willed it.

He stood in a far corner of the room, watching us with his bright demanding eyes and a curl to his lip that was half a smile and half something else. He had kicked Clint's rifle into a corner without even bothering to unload it, but he had a better weapon. His thin black cane was pointed at us like a scattergun, and I had the instant conviction that Arvie had been right, that it was a thing deadlier than any of us had ever imagined.

"Even with animals one may miscalculate," Bond said in his clipped, sharp voice. He singled me out, his eyes driving at me like blades. "But by simple fortune you are in a position to retrieve my error, *Orderman.*"

The next couple of minutes were like one of those blood-freezing nightmares in which you're up to your knees in quicksand and can't move a step and something vague and horrible is creeping out of the darkness upon you, and the whole thing is the more awful because you can't cry out and because you can't see the shape of the thing that threatens you.

Then I began to understand what Bond wanted of me, and in spite of my knowing there wasn't any possible way of resisting him, it made me feel a little better to know that he wasn't infallible.

One of Clint's rifle slugs had struck Bond's little carrying case — it turned out later that Arvie had been right about there being

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an antigravity unit inside it, as well as other things — and had grounded Bond here with Letitia. The machine he had come in originally was hidden out in the swamp, and his only means of reaching it now was by the helicopter I had ordered down from Forestry. My job was to go to Bog City and bring back the whizzer.

Bond must have read my mind. "These others I keep as hostages," he said, warningly. "If your control should wear thin, remember that their lives are in balance until you return."

I had a feeling that my hypnosis wouldn't wear off until that little fiend gave me back my body. But would he do that? Would he let us go at all, knowing what we knew? It came to me then that I was thinking like Arvie Moss, and the realization made me squirm mentally because Arvie had called the turn from the beginning and I had refused to listen.

"Speak," Bond clipped, and the spell that held me relaxed enough to let me talk.

"The helicopter won't arrive until morning," I said. I fought for full control of my voice, for the power to yell at the top of my lungs on the chance of drawing help from the highway. But I couldn't do more than answer him. "Shall I go now, or later?"

He smiled, a small and arrogant twist of the lips that made me boil helplessly inside. It reminded me too sharply of a circus ringmaster cracking his whip over the animals and smirking with satisfaction because they couldn't strike back.

"Later," Bond said. He darted a glance at Arvie, maliciously. "Your young friend has evolved some very ingenious theories to account for my presence here. Such acuteness from a lower order is extraordinary enough to justify explanation."

He told us the truth of it in his sharp, brittle sentences, baiting us deliberately with the information and enjoying his little joke the way a sadist might enjoy teasing a pen full of brutes.

"There is no space ship in the swamp," he said. "It is, as nearly as can be expressed in your barbarous chatter, a spatio-temporal transference unit rather than a vehicle. I come from an Earth that is roughly four thousand years in your future."

He let that sink in.

"There is no world-shaking intent behind my visit, as you may have supposed. It is merely that these dark ages are barred to us who travel temporarily, and I am one of the few curious enough about the barbarous years of transition to defy the Board-of-Order edict and investigate for myself. I am not an artist but a — you would term me a hobbyist, a col-

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lector of unusual antiquities."

He darted his eyes at Letitia. "You may tell them why I brought you with me. No reticence permitted."

Letitia nodded woodenly. Only her eyes gave any hint of the humiliation her admission cost her.

"I thought at first that he was attracted to me as a woman," she said. "But I was wrong. He is taking me to the future with him as an exhibit, a specimen to flaunt before his collector friends."

"Precisely," Bond said.

It was as hard on George as on Letitia, but he was as helpless as the rest of us. I could feel the frozen trembling of him, though, and I knew exactly what he would have done if he could. He'd have charged Bond headlong, heat-ray or no heat-ray.

As it happened, that was done for him.

Without a breath of warning there was a deepchested snarl outside and Queenie, Clint's big Airedale, sprang in through the open doorway. A dangling rope-end at her collar told how she came to be here, and the lunge she made for Vail Bond's throat explained why.

Like Jason, she meant murder.

It was like a nightmare all over again, only this time the terror didn't creep — it raged.

Bond's hypnotic bubble had no effect on Queenie at all. She was on him before he could bring his heat-ray into action, and before he had really grasped what was happening she had knocked him flat and was ripping at him like a tiger.

Bond screamed then, shrieking in a weird foreign gibberish that could have been anything from Turkish to Eskimo, but wasn't either. I couldn't understand a word of it, of course, but even at a moment like that it struck me as strangely familiar.

Not that I took time out to puzzle over it. I was fighting with everything I had against the paralysis that held me, sweating with the dread that Queenie might kill Bond and leave us frozen there like dummies.

The break came when the heat-ray cane fell out of Bond's threshing hand and drove a hissing blue-white beam of heat through a side wall of the shack. By stupid luck it also grazed the humming hypnosis bubble and shivered it into a million pieces.

After that, things happened.

Letitia fainted. George, forgetting everything else, knelt beside her, rubbing her hands and talking nonsense.

Arvie and Clint and I piled onto Queenie, who had ripped off most of Bond's clothing and was just closing her big white jaws on his throat. We hauled her away, but we couldn't hold her; she'd gone as berserk as Jason had, and in

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the end Clint had to club her unconscious to quiet her.

Bond wasn't badly hurt, but I never saw a man so badly mussed up. The four of us gave him a thorough going-over, and before we were through I think any one of us would have gone outside and thrown up if the others hadn't been there to see.

Strictly speaking, Bond wasn't a man at all. He had worn that handsome face and body of his in the same way that a man going to a costume ball will wear a clown outfit or a suit of armor, over his own real shape. Queenie had made a fair start at ripping that disguise off; we finished the job, and here's what we found.

He was about the size of a twelve-year-old boy. His body looked to be as soft and boneless as a grub-worm's, and with his curly wig and face mask off his bulging hairless head and pinched little face made him seem less human than a monkey. His eyes were oversized, with enormous pupils and lids that never quite closed, and his ears were just twisty little openings at the sides of his head. He didn't have any toes, just round-ended pads for feet, and his hands — even with their glove-paddings off they were still the most normal-seeming things about him — had four joints to each finger and three to the thumbs.

He had no navel, which meant that he'd either been hatched from an egg or conceived in an incubator. He was a male, but a quick look wouldn't have proved it.

"Four thousand years shouldn't have made so many changes," Arvie said, trying to look professional and sounding just plain sick. "Evolution must have speeded up somewhere along the line, maybe because of atomic wars and radio-mutations. . . . No wonder Bond looked down his nose at us; he's not the same species at all. He's probably *homo superior*, the race mankind will evolve into some day. To him, we're lower than apes!"

Clint broke up Arvie's field day with another problem.

"Hell with the theories," Clint said. "What are we going to *do* with it?"

We stared at each other, just beginning to realize the complications ahead of us.

"Human or not, we'll have to take him in," I said, starting to sweat at the prospect of facing armies of newspapermen and scientists and state police by the troop. "Murder and kidnaping —"

The problem was taken off my hands with a shock sudden enough to stop a weak heart. Something like a cold, tingling jolt of electricity hit the lot of us with a jar that rattled our teeth and left us frozen to the ears.

And into the shack walked the vagrant I had picked up on Thursday and who had broken out of

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my jail not an hour or so before.

He had shucked off his faded sharecropped clothes and shoes, and there wasn't any doubt that he was both male and human. He was the most perfectly built man I ever saw, not much bigger than Bond but rippling with long easy muscles and tanned to the color of light toast. I got a good look at his face when he bent over Bond, and he was smiling. It wasn't the sneering sort of smile Bond had been partial to; this fellow was really amused.

In one hand he carried a little case like Bond's, and strapped to his bare shoulders was a light fabric harness that held a small blue globe in place at the back of his neck. He held a pencil-thin rod in one hand; it glowed faintly at one end and I didn't need to be told that it was the weapon that held us quiet.

Vail Bond groaned and sat up, blinking his huge-pupilled eyes and cringing away from us. He saw our captor then and scrambled up on his toeless feet, stiff and trembling.

"*Ordmn*," he said, gasping it out in one syllable.

I recognized the word in spite of his contraction of it, and for the first time I began to think we might come out of this jam alive. What Bond said was "*Orderman*," the same term he'd used for me, and it made the situation plain enough. Bond had come back four thousand years through time to satisfy his curiosity and to pick up a couple of forbidden knick-knacks for his collection; this other was a police officer sent to pick him up. It was even clear why the Orderman had let himself be arrested as a vagrant, because what better hiding place could he want than a tanktown jail where he could lie low and wait for Bond to show up?

The Orderman said something sharp to Bond, who gathered up his traveling case and heat-ray cane on the double and went out of the shack like a kid caught playing hooky. The Orderman gave us something to think about before he followed.

"Such a thing will not happen again," he said. His tone made it a promise. "In my time, variant mutations have evolved several divergent species from the parent stock. Most of them, like this one, consider themselves superior, but do not lose faith in your future because of them. *Homo sapiens* remains predominant — and in control."

At the doorway he paused, chuckling over our new dilemma. "Such anomalous occurrence will not be credited by your authorities without proper proof. I suggest that you settle upon an account consistent with contemporary possibilities. It should prove interesting."

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He went out after Bond, and a moment later we heard the two of them take to the air with a thin whimpering sound exactly like the crying Clint had described. It wasn't really a crying, but the whining protest of an overloaded generator; those little antigravity units they used for flying were never meant to carry a double load.

A couple of minutes later, when they were well over the swamp, our paralysis slipped away. Arvie and Clint and I made a dash for the door, piling outside just in time to see the southern sky blaze up with a brilliant blue flash that left the three of us blind as bats for the next couple of minutes.

And when we could see again there was nothing before us but the swamp. The big green bullfrogs, startled into silence for the moment by the flash, took up their old chorus again: *groonk, groonk, groonk. . . .*

We went inside again and found Letitia in George McClure's arms, crying her heart out on his shoulder. For once I didn't blame her; it must have been the devil of a shock to her, after all her years of playing the unattainable goddess, to be dragged off as a specimen for his private zoo by the one man she had played up to. George felt it, too. He was patting her shoulder gently and saying "There, there," as if he were quieting a frightened baby. His eyes, though, were shining as if he'd just been given a glimpse into the Hereafter.

And that seemed to wind everything up.

We couldn't help seeing that the Orderman had been right. If we turned in the real story of what had happened to us, we'd not only be suspected of having done away with Vail Bond — we might be locked up as loonies in the bargain.

So we kept the truth to ourselves and reported Bond drowned in the quicksands of Coot Swamp. Next day, Clint Harmon and the Forestry man and I searched the swamp from end to end with our borrowed helicopter, but we didn't find anything more remarkable than Reese Tanner's jerry-built moonshine still.

Oh, there was a scuffed spot where some sort of machine might have rested and a ring of cypresses shriveled a little by what could have been a sudden blast of heat. But the grass could have been trampled by animals and trees are always being struck by lightning.

Reese's death is still on the books as an unsolved mystery, but nobody cares particularly.

The business had one good result, though.

Letitia Dunne seemed to have decided that there are other things in life besides art and economics and education and efficiency. She

(*Continued on page 88*)

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De Persiis

He came in with a battered portfolio under one arm and his hat in his hand. His name, he said, was De Persiis and he was an artist. Not the three-oranges-in-a-bowl kind of artist. More on the fast sketch side; in a way you might call them cartoons. Seems he was from South America and his work had appeared in publications down there. Would we like to look at some samples?

We would, and we did. Somebody said, "Steinberg?" but that was too hurried a comparison to be accurate. However, our art editor stopped all speculation by saying, "This stuff we can use!"

Here they are. We hope you'll like them as much as we did.

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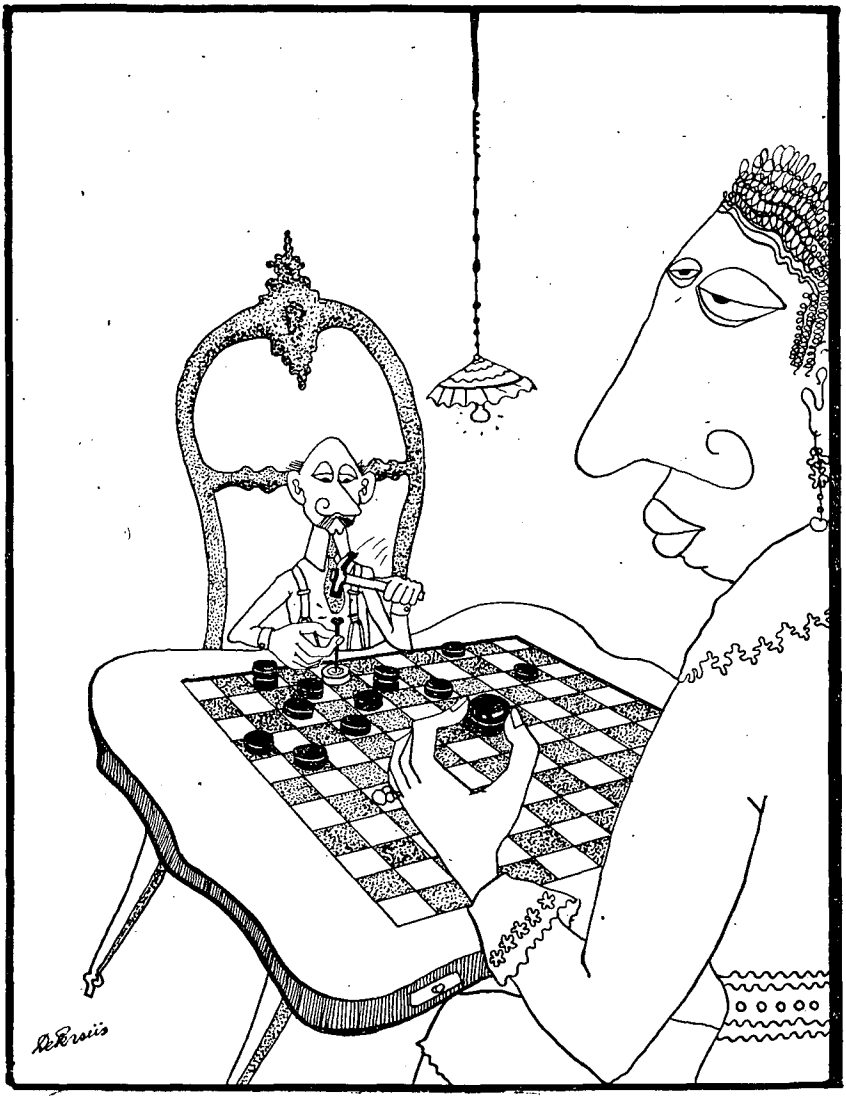

"That's hardly sporting, you know"

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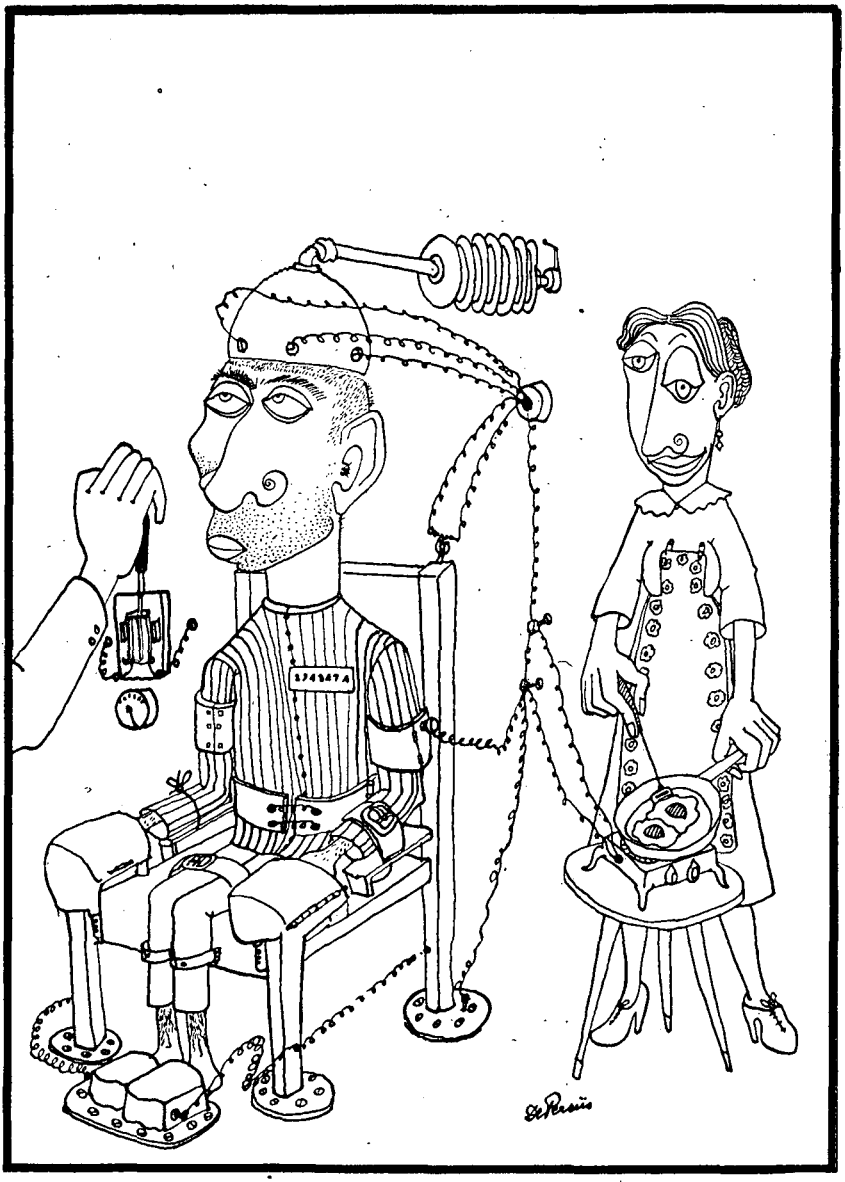
A penny saved . . .



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The Roller Coaster

by ALFRED BESTER

Here is as startling a concept as we've come across lately in fantasy and science fiction. If you happen to be the type of reader who says, upon finishing a story, "You know, there could be something to that!" then it might be just as well for you to skip over to page 89 and get into Esther Carlson's masterpiece of quiet horror. For Bester's tale has a strong thread of plausibility running through it — just enough conviction, if fact, to wake you up in the middle of the night with a feeling that somebody stole the blankets!

Alfred Bester's big claim to fame is that he wrote The Demolished Man: one of the truly great novels in the science-fantasy field. The Roller Coaster is sure to enhance his reputation.

I KNIFED her a little. When you cut across the ribs it hurts like sin but it isn't dangerous. The knife slash showed white, then red. She backed away from me in astonishment, more startled at the knife than the cut. You don't feel those cuts at first for quite a few minutes. That's the trouble with a knife. It numbs and the pain comes slow.

"Listen, lover," I said. I'd forgotten her name. "This is what I've got for you. Look at it." I waggled the knife. "Feel it." I slapped her across the face with the blade. She stumbled back against the couch, sat down and began to shake. This was what I was waiting for.

"Go ahead, you bitch. Answer me."

"Please, David," she muttered.

Dull. Not so good.

"I'm on my way out," I said. "You lousy hooker. You're like

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Illustrator: B. Krigstein

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all the rest of these cheap dames."

"Please, David," she repeated in a low voice.

No action here. Give her one more try.

"Figuring you for two dollars a night, I'm into you for twenty." I took money from my pocket, stripped off the twenty in singles and handed it to her. She wouldn't touch it. She sat on the edge of the couch, blue-naked, streaming blood, not looking at me. Just dull. And mind you, a girl that made love with her teeth. She used to scratch me with her nails like a cat. And now . . .

"Please, David," she said.

I tore up the money and threw it in her lap.

"Please, David," she said.

No tears. No screams. No action. She was impossible. I walked out.

The whole trouble with these neurotics is that you can't depend on them. You case them. You work them. You build to the climax. You trigger them off, but as often as not they dummy up like that girl. You just can't figure them.

I looked at my watch. The hand was on twelve. I decided to go up to Gandry's apartment. Freyda was working Gandry and would most likely be there setting him up for the climax. I needed advice from Freyda and I didn't have much time left.

I walked north on Sixth Avenue — no, The Avenue of the Americas; turned west on 55th and went to the house across the street from Mecca Temple — no, The New York City Center. I took the elevator up to the PH floor and was just going to ring Gandry's bell when I smelled gas. I knelt down and sniffed at the edge of Gandry's door. It was coming from his apartment.

I knew better than to ring the bell. I got out my keys, touched them to the elevator call-button to dissipate any electrostatic charge on them, and got to work on Gandry's door. I barbered the lock in two or three minutes, opened the door and went in with my handkerchief over my nose. The place was pitch dark. I went straight to the kitchen and stumbled over a body lying on the floor with its head in the oven. I turned off the gas and opened the window. I ran into the living room and opened windows. I stuck my head out for a breath, then came back and finished airing the apartment.

I checked the body. It was Gandry all right. He was still alive. His big face was swollen and purple and his breathing sounded a little Cheynes-Stokesish to me. I went to the phone and dialed Freyda.

"Hello?"

"Freyda?"

"Yes?"

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"Where are you? Why aren't you up here with Gandry?"

"Is that you, David?"

"Yes. I just broke in and found Gandry half dead. He's trying suicide."

"Oh, David!"

"Gas. He's reached the climax all by his lonely lone self. You been building him?"

"Of course, but I never thought he'd —"

"He'd try to sneak out on the pay-off like this? I've told you a hundred times, Freyda. You can't depend on potential suicides like Gandry. I showed you those trial-cut scars on his wrist. His kind never give you any action. They —"

"Don't lecture me, David."

"Never mind. My girl was a bust, too. I thought she was the hot acid type. She turned out to be warm milk. I want to try that Bacon woman you mentioned. Would you recommend her?"

"Definitely."

"How can I find her?"

"Through her husband, Eddie Bacon."

"How can I find him?"

"Try Shawn's or Dugal's or Breen's or The Greek's. But he's a quonker, David. A time-waster, and you haven't much time left."

"Doesn't matter if his wife's worth it."

"She's worth it, David. I told you about the gun."

"Right. Now what about Gandry?"

"Oh, to hell with Gandry," she snapped, and hung up.

That was all right with me. It was about time Freyda got sense enough to lay off the psychotics. I hung up, closed all the windows, went back to the kitchen and turned on the gas. Gandry hadn't moved. I put out all the lights,

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went down the hall and let myself out.

I went looking for Eddie Bacon. I tried for him at Breen's, at Shawn's, at Dugal's. I got the break at The Greek's on East 52nd Street.

I asked the bartender: "Is Eddie Bacon here?"

"In the back."

I looked past the juke box. The back was crowded. "Which one is Eddie Bacon?"

He pointed to a small man alone at a table in the corner. I went back and sat down. "Hi, Eddie."

Bacon glanced up at me. He had a seamed pouchy face, fair silky hair, bleak blue eyes. He wore a brown suit and a blue and white polka-dot tie. He caught me looking at the tie and said: "That's the tie I wear between wars. What are you drinking?"

"Scotch. Water. No ice."

"How English can you get?" He yelled: "Chris!"

I got my drink. "Where's Liz?" I asked.

"Who?"

"Your wife."

"I married eighteen feet of wives," he mumbled. "End to end. Six feet each."

"Three fathoms of show girls," I said.

"Which were you referring to?"

"The third. The most recent. I hear she left you."

"They all left me."

"Where's Liz?"

"It happened like this," Bacon said in a bewildered voice. "I can't figure it. Nobody can figure it. I took the kids to Coney Island. . . ."

"Never mind the kids. Where's Liz?"

"I'm getting there," Bacon said irritably. "Coney Island's the damnedest place. Everybody ought to try that trap once. It's primitive stuff. Basic entertainment. They scare the hell out of you and you love it. Appeals to the ancient history in us. The Cro-Magnons and all that."

"The Cro-Magnons died out," I said. "You mean the Neanderthals."

"I mean prehistoric memories," Bacon went on. "They strap you into that roller coaster, they shove you off and you drop into a race with a dinosaur. He's chasing you and you're trying to keep it from ending in a dead heat. Basic. It appeals to the stone-age flesh in us. That's why kids dig it. Every kid's a vestigial remnant from the stone age."

"Grown-ups too. What about Liz?"

"Chris!" Bacon yelled. Another round of drinks came. "Yeah . . . Liz," he said. "The girl made me forget there ever was a Liz. I met her staggering off the roller coaster. She was waiting. Waiting to pounce. The Black Widow Spider."

"Liz?"

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"No. The little whore that wasn't there."

"Who?"

"Haven't you heard about Bacon's Missing Mistress. The Invisible Vice Girl? Bacon's Thinking Affair?"

"No."

"Hell, where've you been? How Bacon rented an apartment for a dame that didn't exist. They're still laughing it up. All except Liz. It's all over the business."

"I'm not in your business."

"No?" He took a long drink, put his glass down and glowered at the table like a kid trying to crack an algebra problem. "Her name was Freyda. F-R-E-Y-D-A. Like Freya, Goddess of Spring. Eternal youth. She was like a Botticelli virgin outside. She was a tiger inside."

"Freyda what?"

"I don't know. I never found out. Maybe she didn't have any last name because she was imaginary like they keep telling me." He took a deep breath. "I do a crime show. I know every crook routine there is. That's my business — the thief business. But she pulled a new one. She picked me up by pretending she'd met the kids somewhere. Who can tell if a kid really knows someone or not? They're only half human anyway. I swallowed her routine. By the time I realized she was lying, I'd met her and I was dead. She had me on the hook."

"How do you mean?"

"A wife is a wife," Bacon said. "Three wives are just more of the same. But this was going to bed with a tiger." He smiled sourly. "Only it's all my imagination, they keep telling me. It's all inside my head. I never really killed her because she never really lived."

"You killed her? Freyda?"

"It was a war from the start," he said, "and it ended up with a killing. It wasn't love with her, it was war."

"This is all your imagination?"

"That's what the head-shrinkers tell me. I lost a week. Seven days. They tell me I rented an apartment all right, but I didn't put her in it because there never was any Freyda. We didn't tear each other apart because there was only me up there all the time. Alone. She wasn't a crazy, mauling bitch who used to say: 'Sigma, darling . . .'"

"Say what?"

"You heard me. 'Sigma, darling.' That's how she said goodbye. 'Sigma, darling.' That's what she said on the last day. With a crazy glitter in her virgin eyes. Told me it was no good between us. That she'd phoned Liz and told her all about it and was walking out. 'Sigma, darling,' she said and started for the door."

"She told Liz? Told your wife?"

Bacon nodded. "I grabbed her

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and dragged her away from the door. I locked the door and phoned Liz. That tiger was tearing at me all the time. I got Liz on the horn and it was true. Liz was packing. I hung that phone up on that bitch's head. I was wild. I tore her clothes off. I dragged her into the bedroom and threw her down and choked her. Christ! How I strangled her . . ."

After a pause, I asked: "Liz?"

"They were pounding on the door outside," Bacon went on. "I knew she was dead. She had to be dead. I went and opened the door. There were six million cops and six million honest johns still squawking about the screaming. I thought to myself: 'Why, this is just like the show you do every week. Play it like the script.' I said to them: 'Come on in and join the murder — ' " He broke off.

"Was she dead . . . Freyda?"

"There was no murder," he said slowly. "There was no Freyda. That apartment was ten floors up in the Kingston Hotel. There wasn't any fire-escape. There was only the front door jammed with cops and squares. And there was no one in the apartment but a crazy guy — naked, sweating and swearing. Me."

"She was gone? Where? How? It doesn't make sense."

He shook his head and stared at the table in sullen confusion. After a long pause he continued: "There was nothing left from Freyda but a crazy souvenir. It must have busted off in the fight we had — the fight everybody said was imaginary. It was the dial of her watch."

"What was crazy about it?"

"It was numbered from two to twenty-four by twos. Two, four, six, eight, ten . . . and so on."

"Maybe it was a foreign watch. Europeans use the twenty-four hour system. I mean, noon is twelve and one o'clock is thirteen and —"

"Don't overwhelm me," Bacon interrupted wearily. "I was in the army. I know all about that. But I've never seen a clock-face like that used for it. No one has. It was out of this world. I mean that literally."

"Yes? How?"

"I met her again."

"Freyda?"

He nodded. "I met her in Coney Island again, hanging around the roller coaster. I was no fool. I went looking for her and I found her."

"Beat up?"

"Not a mark on her. Fresh and virgin all over again, though it was only a couple of weeks later. There she was, the Black Widow Spider, smelling the flies as they came staggering off the roller coaster. I went up behind her and I grabbed her. I pulled her around

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into the alley between the freak tents and I said: 'Let out one peep and you're dead for sure this time.' "

"Did she fight?"

"No," he said. "She was loving it. She looked like she just found a million bucks. That glitter in her eyes . . ."

"I don't understand."

"I did when I looked at her. When I looked into that virgin face, happy and smiling because I was screaming at her. I said: 'The cops swear nobody was in the apartment but me. The talk-doctors swear nobody was ever in the apartment but me. That put you inside my head and that put me inside the Section Eight ward for a week.' I said: 'But I know how you got out and I know where you went.' " He stopped and looked hard at me. I looked hard at him.

"How drunk are you?" he asked.

"Drunk enough to believe anything."

"She went out through time," Bacon said. "Understand? Through time. To another time. To the future. She melted and dissolved right out."

"What? Time Travel? I'm not drunk enough to believe that."

"Time Travel." He nodded. "That's why she had that watch — some kind of time machine. That's how she got herself patched up so fast. She could have stayed up there for a year and then come right back to Now or two weeks after Now. And that's why she said 'Sigma, darling.' It's how they talk up there."

"Now wait a minute, Eddie —"

"And that's why she wanted to come so close to getting herself killed."

"But that doesn't make sense. She wanted you to knock her around?"

"I told you. She loved it. They all love it. They come back here, the bastards, like we go to Coney Island. They don't come back to explore or study or any of that science-fiction junk. Our time's an amusement park for them, that's all. Like the roller coaster."

"What's the roller coaster?"

"Passion. Emotion. Screams and shrieks. Loving and hating and tearing and killing. That's their roller coaster. That's how they get their kicks. It must be forgotten up there in the future, like we've forgotten how it is to be chased by a dinosaur. So they come back here for it. This is the stone age for them."

"But —"

"All that stuff about the sudden up-swing in crime and violence and rape. It isn't us. We're no worse than we ever were. It's them. They come back here. They goad us. They macerate us. They stick pins in us until we blow our tops and give them their

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roller coaster ride."

"And Liz?" I asked. "Did she believe this?"

He shook his head. "She never gave me a chance to tell her."

"I hear she kicked up quite a fuss."

"Yeah. Six beautiful feet of Irish rage. She took my gun off the study wall — the one I packed when I was with Patton. If it'd been loaded there wouldn't have been any make-believe murder."

"So I heard, Eddie. Where's Liz now?"

"Doing a burn in her old apartment."

"Where's that?"

"Ten-ten Park."

"Mrs. Elizabeth Bacon?"

"Not after Bacon got D.T.s nailed to the name in the papers. She's using her maiden name."

"Oh, yes. Elizabeth Noyes, isn't it?"

"Noyes? Where the hell did you get that? No. Elizabeth Macy." He yelled: "Chris! What is this — a desert!"

I looked at my time-meter. The hand was halfway from twelve to fourteen. That gave me eleven days more before I had to go up. Just enough time to work Liz Macy for some action. The gun was real promising. Freyda was right. It was a good lead. I got up from the table.

"Have to be going now, Eddie," I said. "Sigma, pal."

GUEST ARTIST

by ROGER DEE

(*Continued from page 76*)

and George stopped at Arvie's service station on the afternoon we finished searching Coot Swamp, and the change in her was something to think about.

She and George had just been married by the Bog City J.P., and were off on a minute's-notice honeymoon trip to the mountains. Letty — she wouldn't be called Letitia any more — had slid off her high horse with a bang, throwing away her shell-rimmed glasses and letting her hair down with a ribbon at the back. She was wearing a halter-and-shorts outfit, and the figure she'd been hiding all these years made the Bikini girl look like a female wrestler.

When they had gone, Arvie and I sat around the station and talked, and I leafed through three or four of his science-fiction magazines to see what I'd been missing.

Around noon, a tourist pulled up out front and honked for service. Arvie went out to the pump, carrying his magazine with him.

After that, Saturday was just another day.

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Sketch: L. R. Summers

ROOM WITH A VIEW

By ESTHER CARLSON

You find them in New York, mostly in the rabbit warrens below Fourteenth Street. Youngsters who dream of writing the Great American Novel, of singing the title role in Rigoletto, or of out-smearing Picasso. They dine at Nedicks, browse in dusty shops, and their only real talent is the ability to dream.

Some of them, like the hero of Esther Carlson's astringent little story, find only one remedy for their frustrations — one more dramatic than their dreams. . . .

THERE once was a poor young artist named Bosco Blossom who lived sixth floor rear of a dreadful rooming house on West Seventeenth.

Bosco had a Renoir soul but the convictions of a cubist and his paintings showed a kind of square romanticism that was not in demand. This strange schizophrenia also had an effect on his social life; those whom he could love he could not agree with, and those with whom he could agree gave him the shudders. Consequently Bosco was not only poor, he was lonely.

One fine spring day, however,

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Bosco worked two miracles; he created a masterpiece, and he filled his life with joy.

Bosco was pacing up and down his room, brush in hand, blank canvas all around him, seething with youth and spring and unable to do anything about it, like a bird with a band on its beak.

Finally he cast himself upon the cot and moaned: "A scrap of blue! A fragment of cloud . . . That's all I ask. Is it too much?"

The object of Bosco's dismay was his window, and a fitting object it was indeed. It was the only window in the narrow room and it opened to a vast expanse of ugly brick, the blind slab side of the neighboring warehouse. Below six stories was a filthy court.

"How *can* I be inspired?" Bosco cried out to his fates bitterly. "Give me a room with a view!"

He hung his head over the side of the bed and stared down at his splotched and dried-up palette.

"And you," he said crazily. "*You* would look like a damned Venetian sunset!"

It was only a figure of speech, but it contained an idea. "A Venetian sunset," Bosco repeated thoughtfully. "And what if I had splashed these colors on that vile brick wall. . . . What if . . ."

Bosco ran down his six flights to the street, sprinted into the hardware store, bought a bamboo pole, ran up again, sat on his cot, and began to think.

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ORIGINAL LITHOGRAPH

By RUPERT CONRAD

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He discarded Rio; he considered the Rockettes' dressing room; he gave much thought to the Alps by moonlight. Intellectually he scorned a pleasant daisied meadow; emotionally he could not stand the three-dimensioned, perfect pyramids. Then he examined his painting materials and found nothing but tubes of blue and green and white.

"That settles it," Bosco said. "I'll do a blue nude on a green pony. Anything's better than brick."

With that he tied the brush on the end of his bamboo pole and painted his picture on the part of the warehouse just across from his window.

When his colors ran out, he clambered in off the ledge and stood back for the effect. It was overwhelming.

For what Bosco had painted was the sea-green sea, lit by a bright day, moved by a brisk wind. Delicate white caps broke into chartreuse foam; aquamarine became limpid azure, the horizon shimmered afar off in a filmy mist. The unevenness of the worn bricks lent undulation to the water, gave it sweep to Spain.

"My God," breathed Bosco. "Sheer genius!"

He was unable to do anything the whole day but stare out his window at the vista. Though he had promised himself a walk in the Square, he could not leave his view. The dancing waves lapped against his windowsill and the movements of the city boomed in like distant surf.

Toward evening his landlady came up the stairs to the sixth-floor room, panting the while like a freight engine on a steep grade.

"Blossom," she snorted outside the door. "Rent due."

Bosco returned to reality long enough to shove six worn-out dollar bills under the door.

"Whatcha got in there?" she said. "A girl?"

"No, ma'am," said Bosco.

"Huh," she said, and departed.

Bosco felt a little sick but he consoled himself, for now that he had his view his brush would stroke out pictures of divine reason and beauty and pretty girls and fine fellows would say to him: "Come, Bosco, we are having a party tonight. We all want you to come." Of course!

He dreamed, and for weeks he scarcely took his eyes off the window except to go down the hall, as one must do in rooming houses, or to rush to Nedick's for a quick cheese sandwich. In the early morning the aspect of the sea was fresh and new; by noon the swells grew rounder, heavier. Dusk gave the water a leaden, ominous, exciting power, but night found it sheathed in sheer loveliness. The glare of the city's lights could not touch Bosco's view; instead, a

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glow from above seemed to diffuse over it, tinging the crests with cool silver. He was content. His was the ever-changing, never-changing sea.

That is, he was content for a while. One morning in early summer he began to pace the floor.

"Look at this hideous, mouse-gnawed hole!" he cried. "How unbecoming. How unseemly. Though my view inspires me to the greatest degree, the moment I take my eyes away from it and pick up my brush, alas, I am surrounded by scabby brown walls, a tipsy couch, a pot-bellied dresser! How can I release my Art in such an interior?" And life was ruined until he received his second great idea.

He painted his room.

He painted his room white. Not for nothing had Bosco once seen the saloon of a yacht. Very life-like on the walls he drew life-savers; he strung ropes around with his brush and, with an orange crate and a bit of judicious hammering so as not to arouse his landlady, he turned his cot into a bunk. He did not fashion portholes. There was only one porthole, and it had the view.

So exquisite was his workmanship, so life-like in every detail, that his easel with its empty canvas seemed a jarring note and he tucked them under the bunk and stowed his art materials aft. That night as he lay in his cabin listening to the crashing breakers of the city-sea, the mewing cries of the taxi-gulls, he felt the gentle sway of the boat under his frail body. The lash of the rain woke him in the morning and through it dimly he saw his oily sea swelling, rolling, and when the Queen Mary boomed in the harbor it seemed only natural for Bosco to reach up, pull an imaginary cord and give her an answering call.

During the midsummer storms Bosco acquired sea legs and not even the lurching of his vessel in the heaving waters threw him to the deck. Then there were the calm days and nights when the boat steered effortlessly on her course and he needed to do nothing but lie on his bunk and dream. It was great fun, and one day he went ashore and with his last three dollar bills purchased a yachting cap.

The transition from his cabin to the hallway and the ordinary sounds, sights and odors of life in a rooming house became almost more than Bosco could bear. In his boat he could sniff the fresh salt air; in the hall it was cabbage. The thought of his landlady caused him to shiver, she who lurked in the slimy depths like a sea monster waiting to devour him and his flimsy craft.

"To hell with this!" Bosco told himself. "I'll take my yacht to the South Seas. Anchors aweigh!"

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And he locked himself in his cabin, cast off and took her out.

Once when he was hungry, he let a line out of his porthole. Some joker downstairs put a sardine on it and Bosco hauled it up and ate it for supper. And all the time it got warmer and warmer, for August was upon the city, and the sea.

Bosco felt the tropical breeze on his cheek. "I should be sighting land soon," he mused. To make certain of it he found his bamboo pole, resurrected his paint brush and green paint and put, on his horizon, a palm-fringed island.

But though the days and nights stretched on and there was not a breath of air, the island drew no closer. Bosco really didn't expect it to; he was not utterly mad.

"Becalmed!" he repeated over and over, shaking his head, conscious that his position was dangerous. The monster would crawl up from her lair at any moment to overwhelm himself and his helpless craft.

There came a still, moon-lit August evening when the sea was calm and awash with silver. In the quiet Bosco heard her coming up — up — up till she was pounding at his door.

"Blossom! Blossom!"

He did not answer.

"I know you're there, Blossom. Three weeks' rent you're owing."

Bosco lay stiff with loathing; the cabin reeked of her foul cabbage breath and he could feel her sneering eye stripping his dream of the magic paint, so that the view became once again but ugly brick and the scab brown walls of his former room.

"I'm coming back in an hour," she hissed. "I'll get this door open. I know your kind. . . ."

Coming back! Bosco cringed. "Anyway," he said aloud. "Anyway, by God, I'll have a revel my last night on board."

From under his bunk he pulled his emergency stores: a bottle of grog, stowed for many a week and unnecessary, for the young sailor had been drunk of the sea air and imagination. He watched his waving palm trees in the distance and moodily swigged from the bottle.

"Room with a view," he said. "Farewell. Good-bye!"

Suddenly the floor tipped, the craft surged forward, the bunk swayed under him. Bosco sat up, staring at his view. He was drawing closer to the island! He *was!* The trees *were* closer, more distinct. Yes, he could almost distinguish a sandy beach out there in the moonlight and closer . . . closer. He peered, squinting his eyes. On the beach were people, girls running about, playing. He could almost hear the laughter. He yearned for them and for the soft sand beneath his toes.

"Hurry!" he cried, tossing

(*Continued on page 161*)

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Illustrator: Menpoza

"Thanks"

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HARDLY WORTH MENTIONING

By CHAD OLIVER

It was just a small gear-shaped hunk of plastic, the kind you can pick up by the thousand at any big modern industrial plant. Only this one was found by a party of archeologists digging around in old Mexico, and the position of the object clearly established that it had been placed there at least two thousand years before!

To Bill Shackelford, leader of the crew, this made no sense at all. He thought it over, then tucked the gear away in a safe place. When he woke in the morning, it was gone. The answer was simple: somebody had removed it during the night. We might as well tell you now: Bill was wrong. You see, the gear hadn't been there in the first place. . . .

For Shackelford, it started in Mexico.

The sun had climbed steadily upward through a cloudless blue sky until it was almost directly overhead, and there was no trace whatever left of the clammy dampness that had filled the early morning air. It was, in fact, getting hot. Bill Shackelford balanced his clipboard on his knee, shifted his position slightly on the unreliable canvas camp stool, and wished that the cook detail would holler them down for lunch.

"Oh boy," said Carl England from the trench. "The find of the year."

The others looked over briefly to see what he had, and then went back to scraping the hard earth methodically with their trowels. John Symmes and Jim Fecho were still kidding around about last night's stew, but the others were mainly killing time until lunch. Which, Shackelford had to admit, was just about what he was doing.

"What've you got?" he asked Carl, knowing full well what it was.

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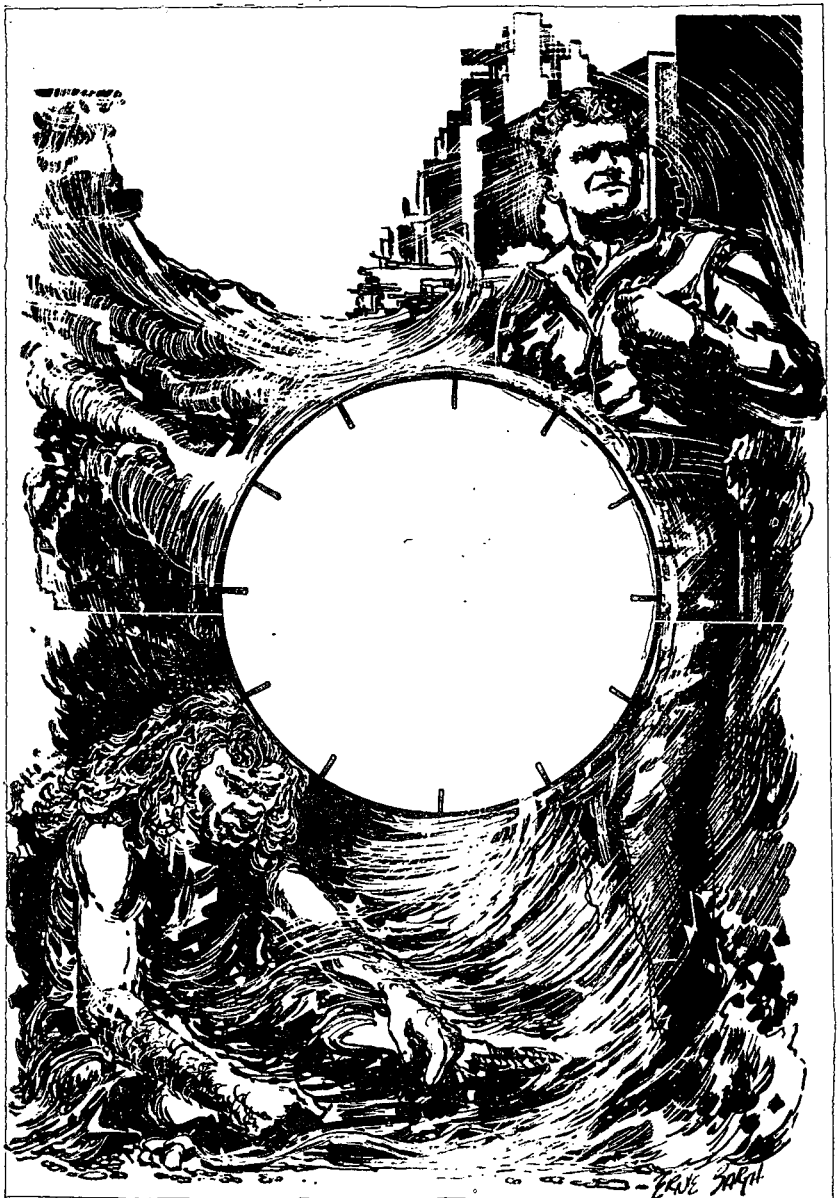

Illustrator: Enwie Barth

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"Potsherd."

"Better measure it in. Symmes, you and Fecho get on the tape."

Symmes and Fecho flipped to see who got the stake end of the tape, then proceeded in slow motion to get the coordinates and datum point on the piece of pottery, which Shackelford duly recorded and glanced at when Carl tossed it to him. It was a fragment of plain gray ware, as usual, and he bagged it without much interest.

The others went on with their desultory scraping in the dirt and Shackelford stood up and stretched. He was six feet tall and a trifle on the thin side, and his bright new Ph.D. was well concealed under his old army shirt and dusty blue jeans. This was the first field school he had run by himself, and they had been lucky. He could not entirely subdue the soft glow of pride that ran through him when he looked at the rectangular excavation and at the students, most of whom reminded him of himself a few short years ago. Just the same, he was getting hungry. He glanced at his watch. Ten after twelve. He pulled out an ungainly red handkerchief and blew his nose, and that was when it happened.

As usual when something interesting turned up, nobody said anything at first. But to his practiced eye the signs were unmistakable: all the students had stopped digging by tacit agreement and were watching Charles Kelley clear something in his square. There were other signs as well — the very air seemed cooler, and all at once no one was tired any longer, and even lunch was pushed momentarily into the background.

Shackelford walked over, trying to see through the knot of spectators, and wondered what it was. There was a slight buzz of conversation, an undertone of interest, but he couldn't make anything out of the scattered words and wisecracks.

"What is it?" he asked, and the others fell back to let him through.

Charles Kelley, who was a graduate student who knew his business thoroughly, looked up and grinned. "You tell me," he said. He hoisted himself up from his archeologist's crouch and moved back to let Shackelford look.

Shackelford squatted down and looked at the thing in the bottom of the trench, still imbedded in the earth. He dusted it with his whisk broom and got down closer. He scratched his head and cleared it a little around the edges with his sharp brick-layer trowel and looked again.

It still didn't make sense.

It wasn't anything spectacular, and in other circumstances it would hardly have attracted at-

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tention at all. It was a round object, about six inches in diameter, and it seemed to have cogs around the edges. It was hard, like pottery, but it didn't *feel* like pottery. It was too dirty to tell him much, but he knew immediately that this thing — whatever it was — didn't belong in a prehistoric Indian village on the Mexican hillside.

"Well," asked Kelley, not entirely without malice, "what is it?"

"You got me," Shackelford admitted. And then he added lamely: "Must be some sort of ceremonial object."

"Looks like a gear to me," John Symmes smiled.

"Maybe it belongs to an ancient Chevrolet," suggested Jim Fecho.

Shackelford grinned, but he wasn't feeling too happy. What *was* the thing? What was it doing here? "Carl," he said, "get a picture of this in place before we take it out, just in case. Some of you guys measure it in, will you? Then we'll grab some lunch, ready or not."

He took out his pocket tape and got a rough depth measurement from the surface. Thirty centimeters. Hardly a vast distance, of course — but still it definitely wasn't surface. What *was* it?

He heard the Rollei click softly as Carl got his pictures, and he took down the coordinates and datum as Symmes and Fecho called them out. Then he carefully removed the disc with his pocket knife, looked at it once, and started down the hill for lunch, carrying it in his hand.

That was the way it started.

His wife, Dawn, had been on the cook detail, and so the canned meat and beans had been rendered fairly edible for a change. Shackelford ate hungrily at the plank table under the sagging sheet of canvas and, not for the first time, occupied his mind by thinking up grisly fates for the young lady who had faked her references as a camp cook and who had turned out to be one of those joyless females whose very proximity caused the food to give up and collapse.

After lunch, during the brief siesta which gave the clouds a chance to reform their ranks for what the students referred to as the Daily Typhoon, he took the thing out of his pocket and showed it to Dawn. He had cleaned it superficially, and two things were clear: it wasn't pottery, and it did have neat, regular cogs in it.

Dawn gave up trying to straighten their little tent and looked at it, her rather impish eyes belying the ethereal quality of her name. "Could be a plant," she suggested. "Remember the story that Dr. Mac tells about the

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cigar store Indian in Chicago?"

Bill settled himself on the cot and frowned. "I saw it in place," he said, "but of course that could have been faked. But I don't much think it's a plant; these are all pretty serious students, even with all the kidding around. If anyone did pull a stunt like that, it would be Symmes, Fecho or Kelley — and it's not a clever enough plant for that. Something like a Folsom point or a bit of Eskimo carving would be more down their alley. This thing doesn't fit at all; it just simply doesn't belong there."

He looked at it. There it was — quiet, unfrightening, a little absurd. Just a neat disc of something that looked like plastic, dug out of the earth where it never could have been. Even in the higher cultures of central Mexico it would have been an utter anachronism, and here, in a relatively simple farming village, it was out of the question. The Indians weren't using any plastics two thousand years ago — nor any wheels of any type, much less a wheel with gear cogs on it. The closest thing to it that had turned up amidst the scrapers and manos and projectile points of the site on the hill had been a small pottery spindle whorl, which was a far cry from the thing he held.

"What are you going to do with it?" asked Dawn, cocking an eyebrow.

Shackelford shrugged. "What *can* I do with it? It doesn't fit in context, it doesn't belong up there. The only thing to do with it is to call it intrusive and file it away somewhere. It's like digging up a Neanderthal in Kansas. The best thing to do is to just cover him up again, unless you want the whole profession knifing you in the back."

"Ummm," said Dawn.

"What does that mean? You know there weren't any Neanderthals to be found in the New World."

"As far as we know," corrected Dawn. "Science is supposed to be self-correcting, remember? No dogmas."

"Ummm," Shackelford said in turn, and lapsed into silence. Dawn was right, of course, as usual. He didn't really believe for a minute that the disc was intrusive, that it just "happened" to be in the site, thirty centimeters underground. That, to him, was fantastic. The big questions were: how did it get there, and what did it mean?

He began to wonder. How many other inexplicable, unsensational artifacts had been dug up in archeological sites, then quietly filed away somewhere because their finders had been trained to believe that they couldn't have been found where they had been found? Every archeologist could tell plenty of stories about things

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that didn't fit. The whole picture of early man was undergoing extensive revision, but you didn't read anything about it in the technical journals. There were certain things that just weren't talked about.

Why?

Shackelford looked at the thing in his hand again and felt a queer tingling along his spine. He put it back in his pocket and got to his feet.

"Back to work," he said. "Better bring your raincoat, hon, and go by and wake up Betty and Jenkins before you come up."

As if to punctuate his words, the afternoon's first thunder muttered above them in the mountains, and a cool breeze rustled across the valley floor.

The afternoon passed without incident, aside from the expected rain, and supper was unusually good, someone having managed to pick up some filets in Toplanque. It was after eight when Shackelford saw the jeep coming down the ranch road and got up from the poker game to greet their host.

One problem that an archeological field party encountered in Mexico was a place to stay. After you were greeted profusely by the mayor and the governor and all the town dignitaries, you still had to have a site to pitch your camp on. This had been solved in Shackelford's case by the foreman of a large American-owned ranch in the hills thirty miles from Toplanque, and periodically they got a courtesy call from the ranch owner, Thomas Fitz-James, when he was in the vicinity. Fitz-James was a very wealthy beer manufacturer who kept three ranches in Mexico as hideaways for his children on summer vacations.

The jeep stopped and Fitz-James telescoped out from behind the wheel. "Telescoped" was literally the right word, Shackelford thought, but even that left something to be desired. Fitz-James was the biggest man Shackelford had ever seen. An incredible seven feet two inches tall, he was perfectly proportioned, and at a distance seemed to be merely a tall man. But when he came toward you and kept looming larger and larger he gave you the creeps.

"Howdy," said Shackelford, extending his hand to be crushed.

"Good evening," said Fitz-James in a well-modulated, only slightly arrogant voice. "I just flew in from Cuba and thought I'd stop by to see how you folks are getting along."

"Won't you have some coffee?" Shackelford felt dwarfed and uneasy which, he told himself, was ridiculous. Fitz-James had been a perfect host.

"Thank you, no. I'm expecting

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some people at the ranch tonight. I hope you've found your digging here interesting?"

"Fine so far," Shackelford told him. "We did find a rather curious thing today."

"Oh?" said Fitz-James, towering over him, his gray hair silver in the early starlight.

"Nothing very interesting to look at, I'm afraid — just a little plastic disc that looks like a gear or something. You haven't been running any experimental machinery on the hill, I don't suppose?"

Fitz-James laughed softly. "Hardly," he said. "Perhaps one of the men dropped it up there, however." He didn't seem particularly interested, and Shackelford remembered that his first question had probably been simply a matter of courtesy. "If I can be of any help, just let me know," the giant continued. "Goodnight to you."

"Goodnight," said Shackelford, and watched him leave through the darkness.

Quite suddenly, for no reason at all, the night seemed cold and lonely.

That night, lying in his sleeping bag in the tent, Shackelford stayed awake for a long time. He smoked three cigarettes and watched the little V of stars that glittered through the tent flap. He heard Dawn's regular breathing by his side, and he lay very still so as not to disturb her.

The little stream fifty yards from his tent chuckled by softly in the darkness outside and a gentle breeze tugged at the canvas over his head. It was cool, but not cold, and there was a smell of pines in the air. It was an unusually fine night for the rainy season.

Shackelford usually had no trouble sleeping, and he was annoyed with himself. He thought about a lot of things, but he knew what was keeping him awake. It was the plastic disc, now sitting in a cardboard box under his cot. The thing was certainly commonplace enough, in a way. There was nothing alarming about it, nothing exciting. Most people would have simply written it off as one of those things and forgotten about it.

But Shackelford couldn't understand it, and that bothered him. He had been around too long. He knew that the phrase "just one of those things" didn't mean anything. *Everything* was important once you had the key, once you could read it. Shackelford didn't respect theories overmuch; each year saw a brand new crop of "correct" theories. But evidence was something else again, and that disc was evidence. If he couldn't interpret the evidence, he reasoned, that was his fault, not that of the evidence.

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"Damn it," he said aloud.

To most people it wouldn't have been anything at all. But Bill Shackelford wasn't most people. If he had been, he would not have been here at all, in a little tent in the mountains of Mexico. The thing haunted him.

It was late when he finally fell asleep, and he dreamed about giants. In the morning, when he woke up to call the cooks, the cardboard box under his cot was still there.

But the plastic disc was gone.

II

"We really have no choice, you know," Thomas Fitz-James said quietly.

The Advisor smiled. The trip had been hurried and rather inconvenient, but he was glad to see Fitz-James again, and he was feeling relaxed and sociable. "Nothing to be alarmed about, Fitz," he said. "You're jumping to conclusions again."

Fitz-James sipped his wine slowly and tapped his finger on the table, his ruby ring giving a soft blood-glow under the lamp. "I'm jumping to exactly one conclusion," he said evenly, "and it's this: I want to go on living the way I have been living, and I want my children to have the chance to do the same."

There was a moment of silence while the Advisor digested this. The two men — Fitz-James was slightly taller than the Advisor, but both men topped seven feet handily — faced each other across a polished wood table in a back room of the ranch house. They were comfortable in sturdy, well-upholstered armchairs and while they were quite sober, they were feeling their wine pleasantly. There was no tenseness in the room; the keynote was rather that of grace and urbanity, and both men spoke softly, with the assurance of a lifetime of habit. Strident or unpleasant speech, of course, would have been a social error of grave magnitude.

"An Erasure would be quite time-consuming, naturally," the Advisor pointed out, pouring another glass of wine from the iced bottle on the table. "And no pun intended."

"I am aware of that," Fitz-James said, filling his pipe with fragrant tobacco and lighting it with a special jet lighter. "I might suggest, however, that it is a small investment indeed when weighed against the possible consequences."

The Advisor smiled again. Poor Fitz was getting old; he was beginning to worry about trivia. "Suppose we simply do nothing, Fitz — do you seriously believe that any harm will come of it?"

Fitz-James blew a lazy smoke ring at the ceiling. "There are two possible answers to your ques-

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tion, my friend. The first is that isolated events, of themselves, are seldom as important or significant as we think they are. The most momentous and obvious crises are all made possible by a million other events, known and unknown, that have combined to render them meaningful. If the first fish had never flopped out into the mud, we would not be here tonight. The time to take action is *before* the situation becomes critical, not after. The second answer is that this fellow Shackelford does not impress me as a fool. He is not stupid, and it would be a tactical error to treat him as though he were. I would remind you that we have not attained our present position on this planet by underestimating the opposition. Agreed?"

"Perhaps, perhaps." The Advisor sipped his wine. "It is your opinion, then, that this man will not lose interest of his own accord if he is let alone?"

"That is my opinion, yes."

"And you don't think that an Erasure at this point will only stimulate his curiosity further?"

Fitz-James shrugged. "The old question," he said. "We can't know for certain what the correct policy is; we can only try and see. I believe that this man will be intelligent enough to take the hint, as others have before him. If I am wrong —"

"Yes?"

"Then, obviously, stronger measures will be called for. I repeat that I consider the situation to be potentially a nuisance to us, even a danger. As you know, I do not share the conviction of our time that we are utterly invincible. As was pointed out long ago by our perhaps wiser predecessors, apathy breeds disaster."

The Advisor chuckled. "I don't share your gloomy outlook, Fitz," he said, "but I respect your point of view. Your request is not unreasonable, and I'll back you on it. I suggest we get it over with as soon as possible, and check in at Tracer tonight. I presume you'll want to direct things personally?"

"I'd like to, yes."

The Advisor smiled and pushed back his chair. "Let's go," he said.

The two men stepped into an Arch in Toplanque, Mexico, sat for five minutes in an electric grayness, and emerged in the Tracer Station in Los Angeles, California. The Station was located in a comfortable sub-cellar beneath a walled mansion in Beverly Hills, but would probably have attracted little attention on the surface, California never having been noted for its rigid conformity to standardized ways of living. There were no flashing lights or obscure, mysterious machinery, nor were there black-clad guards prowling about with mur-

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der in their eyes. Rather, there was a large, air-conditioned, well-lighted room. Paintings hung on the walls, and several tall people were engaged in watching and listening to a symphony on television in one corner of the room. There was a desk along one wall, and at the desk sat a woman.

"Fitz!" she exclaimed, rising. "So good to see you."

Fitz-James smiled and exchanged pleasantries. Anne was an attractive woman and well-dressed, but she was inclined to be over-talkative and gushy. Fitz-James had never understood why she had been entrusted with even the clerical work of a Tracer Station, but then, he told himself, that was none of his business and, of course, it was the job of all of them to help one another.

"Business or pleasure, Fitz?" she asked, after running at break-neck speed through the biographies of mutual acquaintances. She smiled with what was meant to be coyness, and Fitz-James recalled that Anne was single again.

"Business I'm afraid," he said, "and rather important business at that, Anne. Would you alert the staff, please, and get a crew ready to go back?"

"Of course, Fitz." She began jabbing buttons and opening relays.

Fitz-James nodded and moved across the room with the Advisor. They passed through a door into a smaller room, and a Tracer technician was waiting for them. He was old and quite gray, but his dark eyes were alert and capable.

"We'll get right on it, gentlemen," the technician said. "If you'll just give us the data, please?"

Fitz-James puffed on his pipe, approving. "We'll just need a small crew, I believe," he said. "Nothing difficult — we'll have to go back two thousand years or so, to Coordinate MDF-604. The clean-up crew that went back to thirty thousand years did very well, but they missed a cog-wheel that later turned up inside a more recent agricultural Indian village. We'll have to go and get it."

The technician thought a moment, then nodded. "I see you understand the technical difficulties involved," he said. "Two thousand years should be safe enough, and cause a minimum of alteration. Anything more recent would be a major operation, and I suppose five years one way or the other won't matter in this case?"

"Not at all."

"Fine, fine. We'll be ready to go in thirty minutes, gentlemen. I wish you a pleasant journey."

One hour later, Fitz-James, the Advisor, and four crewmen stood in the mountains of Mexico, fifty years before the birth of Christ.

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"There it is," said Fitz-James, pointing.

Below them and to their right, an Indian village sweltered in the humid sun of high noon. It stood on a terrace overlooking a green plain that sloped to a clean, glistening stream. It was built in five units, each unit consisting of a walled courtyard of stone and mud, rectangular in shape, within each of which were three small boxlike houses. In firepits between the houses, women were cooking in large clay pots. Naked Indian children played on the roof-tops, and in the distance men could be seen working in the maize fields. There were no animals to be seen. A woman's voice chanted softly, far away, and a hawk slanted on lazy wings across the sultry blue of the sky.

"I really prefer our friends as they are now," the Advisor mused. "So uncluttered and simple, and content to leave the atom alone."

"Don't forget, though," Fitz-James pointed out, "that they weren't supporting us here then — or, rather, now. Our people in America were individualists, independent livers. Quite foolish, of course, and all this land was nonfunctional from the point of view of the mainstream of our development in Europe. It took us long enough to get Cortes over here, you'll remember."

"Let's get to work, my friends," said the Advisor.

The six of them activated their

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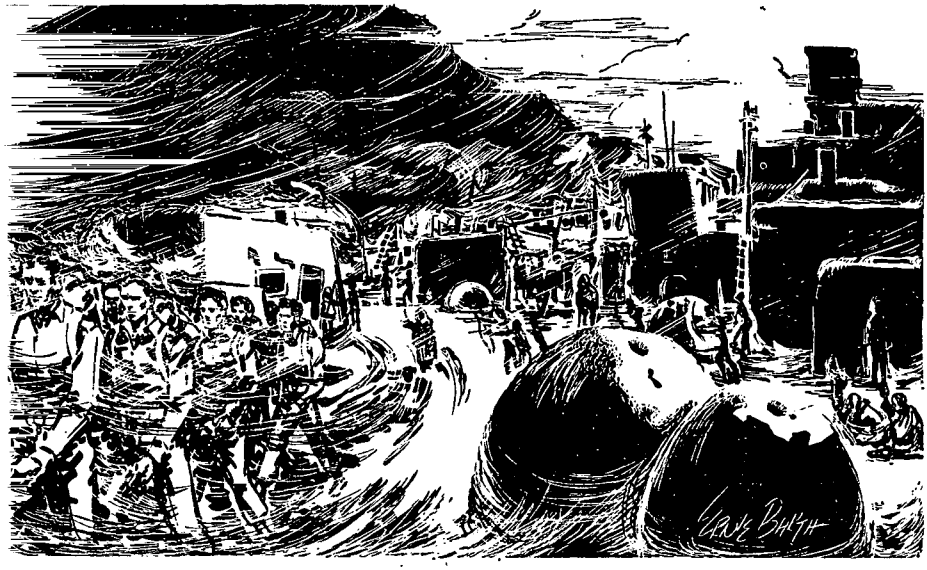

screens and began to walk slowly down a mountain trail toward the village. They picked their way with infinite care, and they touched nothing at all. Time travel was a tricky business, Fitz-James reflected, and it always made him feel vaguely uncomfortable. Since he was a man who valued his comfort, he did not relish what he was doing. Even with all their experience and controls, unexpected things happened. So long as they knew for certain exactly what it was they had changed, they could channel and predict it. But if they inadvertently got in the wrong place at the wrong time, or dropped a steel knife . . .

The Indians saw them coming when they were half-way to the village, and life stopped with an abruptness that was startling. The Indians disappeared as if by magic into their tiny houses and silence was loud in the air. One child still played aimlessly on a hot roof, and a mother materialised out of nowhere and snatched him below. The men in the fields dropped their digging sticks and picked up their bows. Overhead, high in a lazy sky, the hawk still circled on stationary wings.

The tall men did not hesitate. They simply walked into the deserted village, spread out with trained precision, and went to work. Fitz-James, who had kept up with the progress of the ex-

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cavation that was to take place two thousand years later, selected the most likely house structure, bent low to avoid hitting his head, and walked inside.

It was gloomy at first, but he knew that he was not alone. He waited patiently, and in a moment it came. An arrow whistled out of the corner and hit him solidly in the chest. It fell away harmlessly from his protective field, of course, and he laughed softly. There was a second of suspended time, and then three shadows, one large and two small, swished by him and out of the house, as an Indian woman and her two children fled from a monster.

Fitz-James chuckled again, and switched on his light. The little room was quite barren by modern standards, with only a few clay pottery vessels, a bow, and two rude brush mats in evidence on the hard-packed dirt floor. There were two rooms, the inner one being very dark, with a rock-paved floor and stacks of corn and squash. Fitz-James concentrated on the outer room.

With his electronic-analyzer probe, he swept the floor. The instrument blinked repeatedly, and he read off the spectrum with a practiced eye. Pottery, flint, basketry, wood, bone — and there it was. He smiled, ignoring another arrow that whistled in from outside and hit him in the back. Plastic; this was really too easy. It was no wonder that his people were becoming complacent; he even had to watch himself.

Carefully, Fitz-James took a tiny cutter and drilled his way into the earth floor. He did not have far to go, and quite soon he reached into the hole, picked out the cogged plastic disc, and put it into his pocket. Then he filled in the hole again, smoothed down the dirt, and left. Another arrow hit him in the chest as he walked outside, and he threw it away with a smile.

An Indian confronted him in the courtyard — a small man, nearly naked, with a single feather in his hair and a bow in his hand. Fitz-James walked toward him steadily, glowing slightly from his force field. The Indian stood his ground until the strange thing almost touched him, then he turned and fled from the unknown and the horrible. The village was very quiet.

"I've got it," Fitz-James called out. "Let's go back."

The others emerged from houses, quietly and without fuss, and together they walked back up the trail to where their Tracer waited. When they were half-way to their destination, one of the crewmen took a bit of worked flint out of his shirt pocket and placed it carefully along the trail.

"The Substitution boys decided to kill two birds with one stone," he explained.

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Fitz-James glanced at the flint and raised an eyebrow. It was a rather large spear point, beautifully made, fat, and with a distinctive channel groove sliced out of each side. It nestled among the rocks where it had been placed, looking quite natural despite the fact that it had been specially treated to give the proper radiocarbon reading when it was found two thousand years later.

"A Folsom point?" he questioned.

The crewman nodded. "They've decided to extend the complex into Mexico," he said. "Silly, of course, but it ties in with their current theories, and it will keep them from looking for anything else for awhile."

"Substitution knows best, naturally," Fitz-James said.

They walked on to the Tracer and stepped inside. Behind them, Fitz-James knew, the Indians were sneaking back into their village, terror-stricken over something that was beyond their comprehension. There would be whispered conferences and strange chants under the cold full moon. There would be dreams and stories of the giants who had come from the skies. There would be ceremonials and dances, and perhaps labored pictographs scrawled on the smoke-blackened walls of a mountain rock shelter. Weird, unearthly drawings, distorted and unreal, that would one day be collected and explained blithely away in a thesis that no one would read. . . .

The Tracer hummed, shimmered and vanished.

The hot sun burned in the humid air, and the hawk still circled with utter unconcern on splendid wings.

"I'm terribly sorry you can't stay, Fitz," said the woman at the desk. "We see so little of you these days."

"I am sorry, Anne. But I really must get back to the ranch. You must come and visit me soon."

Fitz-James turned away and shook hands with the Advisor. "Good of you to help out," he said. "I'll keep you posted on any new developments."

"Not at all," the Advisor said. "Feel free to call on me at any time."

Thomas Fitz-James waved to his friends around the room, patted the plastic disc in his pocket, set the controls, and stepped into an Arch. Five minutes later he was home in Mexico. He locked the disc in his safe, turned out all the lights, and went to bed to sleep the dreamless sleep of the well-content. The crisis was past.

At that very moment, a few miles away, Bill Shackelford lay restlessly awake in his tent, smoking a cigarette, with an empty box under his cot.

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III

When Bill Shackelford awakened, he still had his memory intact and unaltered. It had once been assumed, by those concerned with such speculative mental exercise, that the effects of time travel, however confusing and paradoxical, would be essentially direct-line cause-and-effect relationships. Either something happened one way or it happened another, it being obviously impossible for, say, the United States to both exist and not exist at the same time and in the same dimension. Following this either-or line of reasoning, the theorists were much interested in the concept of alternate patterns of development, and it was asserted that it was possible, granting the existence of time travel, to go back into the past in order to radically change the present.

However logical and comfortable this idea may have been — and even accurate to some extent — it offered a source of considerable amusement to those who had empirical experience in working in the time stream. Reality, with a characteristically stubborn disregard for logic, failed to conform. Time travel turned out to be far more tricky and subtle than it had seemed to the earlier experimenters. After three hundred years of work, the future remained a blank — utterly inaccessible. All peoples, whatever their differences, were of necessity time travellers, moving ever forward into the future. This proceeded at a constant rate, evidently, and could not be altered. In a very real sense, the future did not yet exist at any given time, and therefore one could not venture into it.

The past *did* exist — *and so did the present.* The really vital point was that the so-called present was actually little more than a concept; it came and went with such rapidity that it could not be pinned down. It was not static, but ever-changing. It was a tiny, chaotic bubble of activity, rushed along into the future at the very tips of rigid, telescoping pencils of past development. It was fluid in the bubble, but it solidified instantly in the fractional part of a microsecond required for the present to turn into the past.

Change took place, from moment to moment, in the swirling bubble; the bubble, however, was still there at the end of its developmental column, right where it "had" been. In other words, in its practical aspects, if a man picked up a rock in that portion of past time designated as "yesterday," then he *did* have the rock yesterday, and it was "there." If another man in the bubble of the present went back to what might be described as the day *before* yesterday and removed the rock,

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a logical paradox resulted. There was after all, only the one rock — and it couldn't be in two different places at the same time.

Working through laws almost unimaginably complex and inflexible, nature came up with quite a simple, workable resolution of the paradox. There was only one place in which change could occur, and that was in the fluid bubble of the rushing present. Therefore, inexorably, that was where the change *did* occur. In the instant of the total present, the rock changed locations. Its original owner no longer had it; it simply was not in his possession, because it was somewhere else. However, his finding of the rock on the previous day had been a "real" experience — he *had* found it, and he *had* picked it up. Yesterday, it had been "there." Today, it was elsewhere. He of course remembered having the rock — he *knew* he had it.

Just the same, the rock had changed hands in the present. It could not with accuracy be termed a simple game, but it was not a game without rules. The rules were complex and difficult, but they worked.

There was nothing mysterious about it. It was all quite "natural" and understandable. The game could be played and won — *If* you knew the rules . . .

Bill Shackelford knew only that the plastic disc had vanished.

He was no fool. In any case, he told himself, it took no genius to figure out what had happened. The disc had been in the box under his cot the night before, because he had put it there. It was not there now. Therefore, someone had taken it.

None of the students would have taken the disc, of course, and only one other person knew about it. Astonishing and unreasonable as it seemed, Thomas Fitz-James was the only person who could possibly have stolen the plastic disc. It didn't make sense, but there it was.

That huge, dignified man had crept into their tent in the dead of night and taken something that was utterly worthless. Shackelford tried to imagine it, to bring the scene to life, and failed. That giant slipping through the pines in the blackness under the stars, crouching to come through the tent flap, hovering over him as he slept like a monstrous shadow, reaching down under his cot with that great, strong hand . . .

Shackelford looked over at his wife. Her face was relaxed and very young as she slept, and her short brown hair curled in soft spirals on her pillow. The sun was spilling in through the tent flap, splashing warmly up on the green of her sleeping bag, and she was beginning to stir restlessly. And

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in the night, not a yard from her, had stood —

Bill Shackelford shuddered. There was just no explanation for such a thing, but it had happened. Why?

He was sure of one thing, surer than he had ever been of anything in his life; if he were smart, he would forget that he had ever seen or heard of that little disc that looked like a gear. It wasn't really important to him, and it had led him into a situation for which there was no precedent at all. He had been given a strong hint, and any reasonable man would have to take it. What did it matter to him? He would simply push the disc out of his mind, go on with his work, and pretend that nothing had happened. That was the only possible course.

It would be quite easy and certainly intelligent, and he knew instantly that he wasn't going to do it.

Bill Shackelford walked across the little tent and sat down on his wife's cot. He took her face in his hands and kissed her lightly on the nose.

"Wake up, hon," he said quietly. "I need some help."

Two weeks later, just as the gray of evening was darkening into night, two horses picked their way down a faint trail out of the hills. They sniffed and snorted, sensing the nearness of home, and their riders held them back with difficulty. The air was crisp with the chill of night, and a swollen silver moon was already growing amorphously out of the dark crown of the hills. It was a peaceful scene, almost idyllic, like something out of a travel folder. But the man's free hand kept straying to the cold handle of a .38 revolver at his side, and the woman was breathing hard and fast and shallow.

"There it is," said Bill Shackelford quietly, shifting his weight in the saddle.

Ahead of them, and below them on the valley floor, the ranch buildings were little pin-points of light in the shadows. They looked like stars that had fallen to earth, there to twinkle warmly with sublime disregard for the laws of the universe. A faint hum drifted up to them from where several hands worked late in the little saw mill. There was nothing at all sinister about the ranch, and Shackelford wondered why his hand was trembling as he rode.

They went on at a steady pace, not talking now, and neither making themselves conspicuous nor being unduly secretive. There was, after all, no law against riding across their host's ranch in the evening, and if they were seen they had merely to murmur a polite *buenas noches, amigo*, and pass on. The whole affair, as a matter of fact, struck Shackelford

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as a little unreal, a trifle artificial. He was not a melodramatic man by inclination, and he was thoroughly aware of how illogical his actions would have seemed to an impartial observer. He could hear himself explaining lamely, "Well, the guy gives me the creeps, and anyhow I had a plastic disc that has disappeared."

He forced himself to relax, letting the horse follow his own lead down the familiar trail. There was more to it than just the disc, he knew, and more to it than a feeling of dislike for Fitz-James that he had felt from the beginning. He was dealing with intangibles, perhaps even being quite irrational in his actions, and yet what he was doing was inevitable, for him. Every man's actions are bound up inexorably with what he is, and Bill Shackelford had all his life been driven by two impulses: he didn't like to be a pawn in a game he didn't understand, and when a question kicked him in the face he kept going until he found an answer that satisfied him.

He remembered, riding along in the moonlight with his wife at his side, another, younger Bill Shackelford, sitting in a classroom on a sleepy spring day. . . .

"It's really rather curious about the various Early Man points in the New World," the lecturer was saying. "Ordinarily, you'd expect the earliest stone industry products to be the crudest, with the artifacts becoming more efficient and better made as subsequent improvements in technique were learned. In the Sandia points, this is more or less the situation; they wouldn't be of much interest if it were not for their great antiquity. But look at the other Early Man points! The later Eden points are beautiful things, certainly, and the Clovis fluteds are well-made artifacts, but your Folsom points really take the cake. There they are, almost the oldest known spear points in America, and better made than any that have ever been manufactured since! It isn't much of a trick to chip out a crude projectile point once you know how, but try to make a fluted Folsom some time when you've got nothing to do for a year or two. It's really remarkable, although, of course, there's nothing really startling about it. Undoubtedly, they had a long developmental period behind them in Asia or somewhere. . . ."

"Pardon me, sir," Bill Shackelford interrupted, "but how do you KNOW?"

"Even in science we have to take some things for granted, Bill," the professor said. "Perhaps we don't actually know for certain . . ."

"No," Shackelford had said to himself, "we don't really know."

Outside, the spring winds were soft and warm, and birds sang in the trees.

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They left the horses outside the corral and walked through the night to the main ranch house. There were actually four houses on the ranch that were for the personal use of the Fitz-James clan — one for him and one for each of his three children, in case they should drop in some year for tea. There was yet another — a cozy, L-shaped affair — for the foreman, and a number of small but well-built cottages for the hands. It all added up to a picture that was not exactly the epitome of roughing it on the frontier, Shackelford reflected.

There were a lot of lights on in the main ranch house, and they could hear voices and the tinkle of glasses from within. There seemed to be a perpetual party going on at the ranch, which was a required stopover for all visiting dignitaries from Mexico City and elsewhere, so this was not in itself surprising.

Shackelford took Dawn's hand as they walked, and found it to be steadier than his own. He still was uncertain as to what he intended to do now that he was here, but he was prepared to let events take their course. The two of them walked quietly along down the dirt road, still making no attempt at concealment, but not attracting attention. They reached the side of the house without incident and stopped.

"Little man," Dawn whispered, "what now? If I may ask you!"

"I'd like to take a look in through the window, if you're game."

"I'm with you, Willie — but I feel like a fool."

His heart hammering against his ribs with what seemed thunderous intensity, Shackelford inched along the wall until he was under one of the big double windows. He wiped the sweat off his hands on his jeans, held his breath, and looked in. Instantly, he stiffened, and ducked his head.

A strange new cold stabbed with icy silence through the night.

"Take a look, Dawn," he whispered, "and then tell me who's a fool."

They looked together.

Inside the huge living room were three couples, including Fitz-James and a woman that Shackelford had never seen before. The men were all enormous, although Fitz-James was the biggest one there. The women were smaller, but still very tall for females. They stood on the thick white rugs, their glasses in their hands, talking and laughing in quiet, dignified tones.

Fitz-James had the plastic disc in his hand and they were all looking at it, smiling, sharing some secret joke. One of them turned toward the window, idly, and Shackelford and Dawn dropped back down out of sight.

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They looked at each other in the shadow from the wall. Neither spoke, but they stood close together and both of them felt the same thing. An unbelief, a horror. An iron fist that smashed at the brain. An icy centipede that walked with a million frozen feet up and down your spine . . .

Quite suddenly, the night was alien around them. Their world, their civilization, their neat little value system that had everything in its proper place — all gone, extinguished, clicked out like a false light that had never burned. Instead — the Unknown. Two little mammals, tiny and afraid, peering in out of the night. Two little mammals peering in at — what?

Bill Shackelford clenched his fists as a sea of conflicts tossed within him. The sheer, unassuming familiarity of what was inside the room, a foot from his head, gave the greatest shock of all, he knew. If he had looked into a room and seen something totally alien, that would have been difficult enough to take. But to look into it and see an *almost* normal scene, subtly distorted in only one dimension —

His breath scraped out of his throat in a shallow gasp and he realized that he had been holding his breath. Almost instinctively, he put his arm around his woman. As the first shock of nonrecognition passed, a slow burning anger coursed through him. He felt cheated, tricked. He felt as though someone he had known all his life had suddenly dealt him a stacked hand in poker, or had inexplicably slapped him in the face.

He had been cut down in size, literally and figuratively, and he didn't like it. And he felt somehow — cautiously, uncertainly — that something important was at stake here tonight under the Mexican stars, something far more significant than a little plastic disc or his own non-understanding. . . . .

He took a deep breath. "Dawn," he whispered, "I'm going to go in there and take it away from them."

She held on to him, knowing him, loving him, fearful for him. "It's not worth it, Bill," she whispered. "Nothing's worth your getting killed, nothing, certainly not that little thing. Let's go away from here, think it over, make plans —"

He looked at her in the darkness. "I can't," he said. "You know I can't."

She did know it, and she accepted it. "How?" she asked quietly.

He smiled, somehow feeling better now that the decision had been taken. "Nothing very heroic, hon," he said, as they inched away from the open window. "I value my hide as much as the

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next man. There's no reason why we shouldn't be here tonight — we're guests, not trespassers. I think I'll just drop in and pay a little social call."

Dawn nodded — small and very young in the darkness, and yet filling the night with a dimension beyond mere physical size. "I'm going with you, Bill," she said.

Shackelford pressed her hand. "Let's go," he said.

He knocked on the ranch house door, loudly, using the brass knocker. There was a sudden silence, a short pause. The night collected itself and stood still.

The door opened.

"Hello, Mr. Fitz-James," Shackelford said pleasantly. "We were out riding and just happened to drop by."

Thomas Fitz-James — big, gray-haired, charming — smiled his best smile. "So good to see you both," he said. "Won't you come in?"

They entered the ranch house, passed through the mirrored entrance hall, and walked into the huge living room. The three women were still in it, seated in great, upholstered chairs, their silken feet crossed gracefully on the thick white rugs. In the vastness of the room, they seemed quite normal in size. The men were nowhere to be seen.

Fitz-James made the necessary introductions easily and without strain, without offering any explanation of the women's presence. He seemed thoroughly at his ease, insisted on mixing a drink for Shackelford and his wife, and filled his pipe with a precise care that indicated that he had no other problem in the world.

"Well," said Fitz-James heartily, lighting his pipe and blowing blue smoke gently at the ceiling, "is this purely a social call, or can I do something for you?"

Shackelford sipped his wine, determined that if this were to be a play he would not fluff his lines. "As a matter of fact," he said evenly, "I believe that you can be of some assistance to me."

"Oh?"

"Yes. You recall that small disc I told you about several weeks ago, the one that we found in the dig?"

"Why, yes, I seem to —"

"It's all very strange," Shackelford rushed on, ignoring the unfamiliar heart that thumped and pounded in his chest, "but that disc was lost shortly after I told you about it."

No one moved, no one did anything — but the room was different.

"A shame, a shame," said Fitz-James, shaking his head. "I hope that it has turned up again?"

"In a manner of speaking," Shackelford said, "it has." He paused, and the thought flashed

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through his mind that this scene was supernally long and tiring and that it would never end. "One of your hands was in camp yesterday and told me that he had found it on the road and had turned it in to you. He had heard some of the students talking about it, and he suggested that perhaps you had forgotten about it."

If you hadn't been watching for it, you would never have detected the fraction of a pause before Fitz-James reacted. Then he snapped his fingers, his face lit up in a beaming smile, and he said: "Of course! How stupid of me. It was turned in to me, but it didn't seem important and it slipped my mind. I have so many things to keep track of, of course —"

"Of course," said Shackelford.

Fitz-James looked him in the eye, and his smile went no further than his mouth. "Do you want it?" he asked.

"Yes," said Shackelford, without hesitation. "Yes, I'd like to have it."

Fitz-James nodded, his eyes black. "I'll get it for you," he said, and walked out of the room.

Shackelford stood there and waited, with Dawn at his side. He did his level best to look nonchalant, but he knew he was failing miserably. The best he could manage was a sort of vacant smile on his face as he looked at the women in the room, and he sensed that Dawn was amused, despite her tenseness. He stood there, feeling very odd, and he kept thinking: a little insectivore sitting in his nest, trying hard not to notice the smiling, charming dinosaurs that ring him in. . . .

"Here it is," said Fitz-James, handing Shackelford the little cogged disc that had travelled further than Shackelford knew. "Sorry I forgot about it."

"Quite all right," Shackelford assured him.

"And by the way," Fitz-James said, puffing slowly on his pipe, "what was the name of the man who reminded you of it? I've quite forgotten, and I really should reward him."

"Funny," Shackelford said, meeting his gaze squarely. "I've forgotten too."

Fitz-James didn't press the point — he even seemed faintly amused, and that was far worse than his laughter. Shackelford and Dawn finished their wine and excused themselves, anxious to get out, get away.

"So happy you dropped in," Fitz-James said with genteel heartiness. He shook hands, his great fingers closing like a steel vice around Shackelford's palm. Shackelford kept his face expressionless. "I'll see you again soon," Fitz-James promised with evident sincerity.

"I'll be looking forward to it,"

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Shackelford said, and they left.

The night was cold and clean and dusted with crystal stars. They walked back to their horses, trying not to run, mounted and started down the dark trail for camp. The plastic disc was secure in Shackelford's hand, but his mind was less certain. He was two people. One sat in the saddle and felt the wind in his face, and the other watched sadly from a subconscious Somewhere. Watched the two horses stream over the earth in an easy gallop, watched the world that crouched around them. Watched the man and his wife, afraid in the night. Watched and asked: *What have you done?*

IV

It was the end of summer, a time of brief hiatus between research and the beginning of another autumnal grind. It was a time for relaxing a little, a time for seeing old friends, a time for going down to the bar and cussing the fact that you never had time to go fishing anymore. It was a time for going home. But Bill Shackelford was a long way from Illinois.

He walked rapidly across the almost deserted campus of the University of Texas in Austin, feeling the hot sun beat down on his back and trying not to think, for a moment, about the tiny plastic disc that had so altered his life. He looked at the Main Building as he passed by, and it amused him as always, with its little Greek temple perched as though in perpetual surprise high atop a towering skyscraper that in turn erupted violently out of a broad, rectangular conglomeration of fused classic and Spanish architectural disharmonies. Old B Hall squatted like an antiquarian collector's item in the midst of modern university buildings, and two caretakers were engaged hopefully in trying to make flowers bloom between sterile cement walks. It was a pleasant place, Bill thought — and life was pleasant too, if he would just let it alone. He wondered, not for the first time, what it was that drove him on, and had driven him all his life. Science? Curiosity? Responsibility? A warped sense of fun?

Or was it fear?

He walked into Waggoner Hall, decided against the elevator which probably wasn't working anyway, and climbed the stairs to the fourth floor. He pushed through the double doors, passed along a wary line of desks belonging to Business Administration secretaries, and walked into the Anthropology Museum. Maria was there, and he lingered a minute or two longer than necessary, confirming his opinion that a really good-looking secretary never harmed any department.

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He passed through the empty museum, hardly glancing at the familiar exhibits. Campbell and Krieger were both working with Joe Cason down at Falcon, so the museum was even quieter than usual. He came to the closed door at the end of the room, a door without markings on it of any sort, and knocked.

"If it's Shackelford, go away," a voice ordered.

Shackelford grinned and pushed open the door. He walked into the strange little office and there was Frank Johnston, glowering with sleepy malevolence from an ancient black leather couch.

"So it's you, hey."

"It's me, Frank."

Frank Johnston was as unusual as his office, which was a packed, untidy, wonderful hodge-podge of books, smelly pipes, magazines, weird statuettes and flint artifacts, pin-up calendars, and eccentric stuffiness. He was a short, bulky man, somewhere between fifty and eighty years old, with a shiny bald head, drooping bandit's moustache, and piercing green eyes that were partially shielded by a bent and beribboned pair of rimless spectacles. He was what was popularly known as a character, and he was also just about the best, if the most unorthodox, research archeologist in America.

"Got your letter," the great man said, without getting up from his couch. "Very dull. Sit down. What'd you find, an ancient uranium mine, living proof that Atlantis was under the Rio Grande? How's your wife?"

Shackelford sat down in the swivel chair behind the desk, which squeaked with the surprise of long disuse. "I don't know what I found, Frank," he said slowly. "I thought maybe you could tell me."

Johnston's bushy gray eyebrows lifted a good inch and a half. "Thought you young fellows knew everything. Had to come to the old man, hey?"

Shackelford nodded. "I've about decided I don't know anything," he admitted. "We did find a Folsom point down there, the first one from Mexico, but I don't think that's very important now."

"Out for bigger game, eh?" the old man said cynically.

"I don't know. What do you think?"

Bill Shackelford took the cogged plastic disc out of his pocket and handed it to Johnston. Johnston took it, adjusted his glasses, stared at it, and then slowly sat up on the couch. The smile was gone from his face. He breathed heavily, and a chill settled cautiously in the stuffy room.

"What do you want, Bill?" the old man said. "Where did you get this? *What do you want?*"

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Shackelford was somewhat taken aback by the intensity of Johnston's response, but he felt a sudden reassurance in it. He had gambled, and he had won.

"You do know what it is, then," he stated.

Johnston heaved himself to his feet, wheezed, and made a long ceremony out of lighting his pipe with a singularly foul brand of tobacco concocted from some Indian formula. He didn't answer for a long minute, his sharp eyes flickering from the innocuous little disc to Shackelford and back again. He sat down again, his face very pale in contrast to its usual ruddiness.

"I'm afraid to answer that question, Bill," he said. "I'm being honest with you, and I'll give you some advice: throw that thing away, forget about it, get into another profession, and enjoy your life while you can."

Bill stared at the man. Was this Frank Johnston talking, the man who had such a contempt for authority that he had once shot a blunt arrow at the chairman of the department, and thrown a graduate student out of a first floor window? "I don't understand, Frank," he said. "After all . . ."

"After all nothing," the old man snorted. "I know you don't understand, and I say that's good. Don't try to. Go away."

Shackelford looked at him, feeling the cold sweat in his palms as they gripped his chair. "I can't do that, Frank," he said, "and you know it. I've come to you as a friend, not as an archeologist. I need help, and whether I get it or not I'm getting to the root of this thing. There's more to it than just the disc, you see."

"Ummm," said the man behind the pipe. "Gone that far, hey?"

"Yes," said Shackelford, and told him the whole story of what had happened in Mexico. He wondered briefly at Johnston's devil's grin at the account of the disappearance and recovery of the disc, but hurried through his story to the end, including the impossible giants that frequented the Fitz-James ranch. "There's a game going on, Frank," he concluded, "and I don't know the score. I don't even know who's playing. I think you do."

"Hmf," observed Frank Johnston, filling the room with rank blue smoke. "Maybe you're making more of all this than necessary, Bill."

"How, dammit? If you can explain —"

"Look at it this way, Bill. You found an intrusive plastic disc in an Indian village site, and it was filched by the man who owned the property the site was on. Maybe he collects discs, maybe he's psycho, you see? Funny

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things happen sometimes. Okay, so you go to see him and find tall people in his living room. To borrow a pet phrase of another member of this department, so what? If you were that tall, wouldn't you want to associate with people on the same scale?" He eyed Shackelford narrowly. "Wouldn't you? What's so upsetting about all that? That's my explanation, and I'd say you've gotten yourself all worked up over nothing, d'you see?"

Shackelford fished out a cigarette, lit it, and added more smoke to the little room. "Frank," he said slowly, "do you believe that?"

Frank Johnston snorted. "Rubbish. Of course not."

"Then what *do* you believe? I'm a big boy now; I want to play."

"I warn you: you won't like this game. You won't like it at all."

"I'm going to play, Frank. I might as well know the rules."

Frank Johnston sighed. "I suppose so," he said. "You're a fool, of course, Bill, but I'm proud of you, if that means anything at all."

Shackelford waited.

Frank Johnston leaned forward on the old black couch, his bandit's moustache quivering indignantly. "What would you do, Bill," he asked, "if I told you that we of this earth are not our own masters, and never have been?"

Bill Shackelford sat back, the cigarette forgotten in his hands. His throat was very dry. To suspect something, to have a vague indication, was bad enough. But this bland question . . .

"I don't know," he replied slowly. "You'd have to amplify it some. First: what, precisely, are you saying?"

"Do you have trouble with the English language?"

"I mean, is this the sort of thing Charles Fort talked about —"

Johnston slammed his big fist down on the couch, making a thump and a puff of dust. "Don't be an ass."

"Well, do you mean that Somebody — or Something — has taken over the Earth and is running it as a sideshow? People from space, maybe, or little green men?"

Johnston puffed an explosion of blue smoke. "Bah," he said fervently. "Junk and balderdash. Use your head, man."

"I'm trying to," Shackelford said, and meant it. The cigarette burned his fingers and he ground it out in a marine shell on the desk. "I need some facts. . . ."

"You've got facts, son. Facts are nothing — you have to use them, d'you see? You come waltzing in here with a story about giants and then you talk about little green men. The first step,

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d'you see, is to treat the data with some respect. At the very least you should postulate *big* green men."

Shackelford watched him for a smile that wasn't forthcoming. "It's a little hard to do," he said, lighting another cigarette. "Somehow, when you talk about giants — even when you see them with your own eyes — you can't treat them seriously. They're something out of fairyland, out of *Jack and the Beanstalk*, out of corny movies and screwy fiction. . . ."

Johnston impaled him with his pipe. "Exactly," he said. "Exactly. And go on from there, son. The big question, the one that never gets asked in science nowadays, is: *why?* Why can't you take them seriously? Who or what has conditioned you so that you can't even carry out a logical inquiry about a so-called giant? This is important, and I suggest you think about it."

Shackelford thought about it, his mind in a turmoil. He remembered once during the war, when he had been on leave in Cincinnati, he had gotten on a bus and sat down right next to a man who was an exact double for Adolf Hitler, complete to the last hair on his moustache and the straight black hair on the forehead. They had smiled at each other, and he had paid the man no further attention. Impossible, of course — but what if the man *had* been Hitler?

"There's even some evidence in what we loftily refer to as respectable scientific annals," Johnston continued evenly, "and you might also reflect a moment on what is considered respectable science, and *why*. The study of evolution has shown that a tendency toward size increase is readily discernible. Take our own species, for example. That little insectivore that started things off was a couple of inches long, and here we sit. And the gorilla is bigger than we are, you know. There's nothing fantastic about it at all — we're giants, you and I, in the animal kingdom, and what's another twelve inches?"

Shackelford waited, listening. When Johnston talked, you forgot all about his gnomelike personality; you knew you were in contact with a mind.

"To be more specific, I presume you've read Weidenreich?"

"Well, he wrote a lot —"

"Nonsense. I mean *the* Weidenreich — the monograph, *Giant Early Man from Java and South China*, and the book, *Apes, Giants, and Man*. Here, by heaven, we have the best physical anthropologist who ever lived, and he tells about the teeth of *Gigantopithecus blacki* — three humanoid teeth from the early Pleistocene, *and teeth with a mass six times larger than modern man's*,

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and three times as big as those of any anthropoid or fossil man. You've read it?"

"Well, yes —"

"Bah. They've *all* read it, and what's the difference? They know Weidenreich was the best there was, they know he's got all the evidence he needs, but it doesn't fit the current dogma and so it never even gets mentioned anymore. That's science for you, my boy, and don't you ever forget it."

Shackelford waited a minute, thinking. The chill in the room deepened. "Then you think —"

"Of course. Do you have to have it announced by the government before you believe it? The masters of this planet are not men as we usually think of them. They are not like us, any more than Neanderthals were like us. They're alien all right — but they don't come from a planet called Blotz out near Capella. They come from right here on Earth, my friend, and they've been here as long as we have."

Shackelford sat there in the little room, his cigarette in his hand, and he thought: Man, proud man, strutting and preening on his little stage — an idiot ape, not seeing the bars, not seeing the cage. . . .

"But what are you saying?" he demanded, knowing as he said it that he was only trying to reassure himself, reorient himself, get rid of the facts by tossing them out the door. "How can you possibly know all this? Where's the evidence?"

Frank Johnston laughed shortly. He gestured at the crumpled newspaper lying on his desk, with its big black headlines and its homey philosophies. "That," he said, "is a newspaper. I suggest that you read one sometime."

"You know more about all this than you're telling, I imagine."

"I've told more than I should know, my boy, let's put it that way. And I should know better than to tell as much as I have. I'm not going to draw you any pictures, Bill. I've given you a few hints, but you'll have to take them from there. You'll have to come to your own conclusions, and then make your own decisions, just as I have had to do." He smiled wryly. "I predict you'll have some help."

"What do you mean by that?"

Frank Johnston puffed on his pipe and said nothing.

"And how about that plastic disc? What does it mean? Why was it stolen from me?" Shackelford was on his feet now, angry, bewildered. Who did Johnston think he was, anyhow, to grant or hold back information like a little tin god?

"Take it easy, son," the old man said, not unkindly. "You'll find these things out soon enough, if you don't already know them."

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"Already know them? I don't know anything. If there's some sort of a conspiracy — if we're just pawns in some cosmic chess game — if all this is true — then why don't we do something about it?" Shackelford clenched his fists. "We can't just sit by and be treated like cattle. We're men, we can *do* something, anything!"

Frank Johnston smiled wryly. "What?" he asked. "Perhaps we could phone it in to the Associated Press as a scoop, hey?"

Shackelford hesitated. He had so little to go on, so little data — what could he possibly do with it? He tried to calm down, to think. He told himself that his little discovery hadn't upset the universe, after all — everything was just as it had been before. . . .

"I've said too much," Frank Johnston told him, heaving himself to his feet and adjusting his spectacles. "I won't say anything else, and of course I'll deny saying anything at all if you repeat any of this. You've got some big decisions to make, boy, and I suggest you make them before you go any further. It's a little easier to cross the ocean if you stop long enough to get on a boat first, instead of trying to make one as you swim along."

Shackelford picked up the little plastic disc and put it back in his pocket. "I'll see you again," he said.

"I'll deny everything I've said, Bill," the old man said slowly. "I can't help you any further, and you'd be wasting your time to come back to me. You'll have to go your own way, as I went mine. You'll understand, before you're through. Just use your head, boy, just use your head."

Shackelford turned to go, more confused than ever.

"By the way, Bill," asked Frank Johnston, "how tall are you?"

Shackelford whirled and stared at the little man who stood behind him smoking his smelly pipe. He stared at him in blank consternation, tried to speak, and couldn't.

Shaking and afraid, he left the room.

Bill Shackelford walked across the campus and tried to tell himself that it didn't matter. It was evening now, and the long, soft shadows were creeping along the still sun-warm cement walks. An easy, refreshing breeze whispered out of the north. What difference did it make whether man controlled his own destiny or not? The knowledge that he was only a passenger on the train, and not the engineer, didn't really change anything. He was still where he was, with a life to live and a chance for happiness. Nothing has changed, he told himself, screamed at himself. It's all just like it was before.

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But he couldn't fool himself. Something *had* changed.

V

Bill Shackelford blinked sleepily when the alarm exploded, and fumbled over with his right hand and depressed the stud. The buzzing came to a merciful halt and he sat up and stretched. These eight o'clock classes were hell on wheels, he thought, but they were the traditional initiation rites for the new instructors.

"Wake up, hon," he mumbled, still half-asleep himself. There was no answer and he looked over at the other bed.

Dawn wasn't there.

He was startled for a moment, then decided that she must have gotten up early to fix breakfast. He hauled himself out of bed and into the shower, shaved and dressed, purposely selecting the loudest tie he owned in order to show the class that he was relatively human despite the fact that he taught college. He lit a cigarette, reminding himself again as he did so that he was smoking too much, and walked down through the hall of their small house, passed through the cubbyhole that the real estate man had proudly assured them was a dining room, and entered the kitchen with a wisecrack on his lips.

The remark died before it was spoken. Dawn wasn't there, either, and the kitchen was cold and sterile.

"Dawn," he called, a tight little knot of ice forming in the pit of his stomach.

No answer. The house pressed in around him, and it felt empty. He knew it was empty. There is nothing a man can sense more intuitively than an empty house, and he knew that his senses weren't playing tricks on him.

Slowly, holding himself in check, he went back to the bedroom and looked at her bed. It hadn't been slept in — but she had gone to bed there last night. He looked in the closet, not knowing what he was looking for. Her clothes were still there, including the green print dress she had worn yesterday. He remembered that she had placed it on the chair in the bedroom when she had gone to bed. . . .

"Dawn," he said flatly, not even knowing that he spoke aloud. "Dawn."

She was gone, and he knew he would never see her again. Irrationally, he thought of the little plastic disc. The disc that he had placed in a box under his cot in Mexico, the disc that had vanished. . . .

He sat down on the bed. He could phone the police, of course. He could report his wife as missing. He tried to think, and couldn't. His memory of the last two weeks was curiously blurred. He remem-

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bered the meeting with Johnston in Texas quite clearly, and after that — well, he remembered and he didn't remember. He shook his head, trying to clear it. Dawn had been with him last night, he was sure of that, of course. But details escaped him. What had they done? He couldn't quite remember. . . .

He decided not to phone the police, not yet. He refused to break down. He forced his mind into other channels. He made himself do routine things. He walked back to the kitchen, heated some water, made himself a cup of instant coffee, and drank it all. He had already finished it before he remembered that he liked cream and sugar in it.

It wouldn't do to stop and think. He had to keep doing something. He walked through the silent living room and went outside, locking the door behind him. He looked back and shuddered.

The house was so quiet.

He opened the garage. His blue Chevrolet was still there. He got inside, backed the car out, and drove down the street toward the university, hardly seeing where he was going. Dawn's perfume was still in the car, but it faded even as he drove.

His fists were tight on the steering wheel and it was hard for him to see. No sound escaped him, but he knew that he was crying.

"Dawn," he said again — and that was all.

When he walked into his office, Don Ransom was already there.

"Bill," he said, rising in surprise. "What are you doing here?"

Shackelford stared at him and tried to smile. "I work here," he said. "Remember?"

"Of course. But —"

"But what?" Shackelford walked over to the fellow anthropologist with whom he shared his office. He touched him, and inwardly cursed his shaking hand. "I do work here, don't I, Don? I know this sounds nuts, but I'm so mixed up. . . ."

Don Ransom placed him carefully in a chair, then closed and locked the door. He winked and extracted a pint of Scotch from the bottom drawer in his desk. He unscrewed the cap and handed it to Shackelford.

"Old tribal custom," he explained. "I think you need this."

Shackelford accepted the bottle gratefully and took a long drink. The Scotch slipped down to his empty stomach like warm oil, and diffused a glow of warmth through him. He felt a little better.

"Look, Don," he said slowly, "what's happened? Just pretend I'm suffering from shock or something, and give me the lowdown. Why shouldn't I have come to

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my own office this morning?"

Don Ransom looked at him, frowned, and chewed his lower lip. "You're pretty wrought up, Bill," he said. "Are you sure you don't want to go over to the health service for a checkup, or take a room somewhere for awhile?"

"I'm sure," Shackelford said, closing his eyes. "I'm okay, Don."

"Well," Ransom began, and paused. He swallowed hard, and then began to speak in a low, methodical voice. "Since your wife died in Mexico, you've been pretty upset, naturally. Nobody's seen much of you for the last couple of weeks, and of course we told you that you could forget about teaching until you wanted to come back. I was going to handle your classes. . . ."

"That's enough," Shackelford said, opening his eyes. He began to feel very sick. "Dawn's dead, then?"

"Old man, you'd really better let me run you down to the doctor — you've had a rough time."

Shackelford shook his head. "I'm okay now, Don," he said. "I just wanted to hear you say it. It — it takes a little getting used to."

There was a long, awkward pause, and Shackelford realized that he had put his friend into a thoroughly uncomfortable position. "What am I down for this semester?" he asked, keeping his voice carefully matter-of-fact.

"Well, you've got Anthro 1, two sections, and Anthro 2. They all meet today. Tomorrow, you've got Archeology of North America. As I said, it's no trouble for me to carry on with them for a while until you get to feeling better. . . ."

"I feel great," Shackelford said, with a wry smile. "Never better. Today's the first day of classes, I take it?"

"Yes."

"I won't need to prepare anything, then. Just walk in and give them the old pep talk, and tell them that if they're interested in dinosaurs they're in the wrong room, hmmm?"

"Sure, Bill. But do you really think —"

"I think I'd better, Don, or I'll wind up in a ward somewhere. Thanks a lot for everything, and I'll explain it all to you one of these years."

He went down to the men's room and was violently sick. Then he combed his hair neatly, took a drink of water, and walked into the classroom to begin another semester.

Coming home that night to an empty house was the toughest part of all, and it took him two hours to do it. But when he got there, the house wasn't empty.

Thomas Fitz-James was there

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waiting for him, deep in a chair.

"Good evening," the huge man said, putting aside the book he had been glancing through and rising courteously to his feet, for all the world as though their positions had been reversed and this was his own house. "I've been thumbing over several of your books and find them quite amusing. Absurd, of course, but amusing."

Shackelford found himself taking the situation in his stride; nothing, he told himself, would ever surprise him again. "I'm happy that you find our little efforts entertaining," he said wryly. "We strive to please." Even as he spoke, he thought: thus quickly do our value systems, the principles around which we build our lives, readapt themselves to the Unknown.

"Your liquor is really first rate," Fitz-James commented, raising his glass in a toast. "Won't you join me?"

Shackelford would and did. He poured himself a shot of straight Kentucky bourbon, dropped in a few ice cubes, and sat down in the chair facing Fitz-James. How often, he wondered, had he and Dawn sat across from each other in the evening, sharing a drink. . . .

"Well," he said, "what brings you here? Come back for your little disc?"

Fitz-James laughed heartily, completely at his ease. "No, Bill," he said, lighting up his pipe. "I came here because I believe you are an intelligent man."

"Well, thanks," said Shackelford. "Do I get a gold star in my hymn book?"

Fitz-James shook his head reprovingly. "Come now," he suggested, "you have every reason to be bitter, Bill, but I'm sure that you realize that that sort of talk will get you nowhere."

Shackelford sipped his drink, amazed at his own coolness. He leaned forward. "Can you bring her back?" he asked evenly. "*Can you?*"

"No, Bill."

Shackelford drained his drink and poured himself another. "Have your say, then," he said, "and then get out."

Fitz-James shook his head, his gray hair silver under the lamp light. The man dwarfed the chair he sat in, but he was so perfectly proportioned that you felt your eyes were simply playing tricks on you. "Don't be difficult, Bill," he said. "I've come here at considerable inconvenience to tell you a story. You know enough now so that I need waste no time in convincing you of its truth, and I think you ought to hear it."

"Why?"

"It will save you a great deal of wasted effort, for one thing. It will save us a great deal of work, for another. Also, I rather

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like you. Why play on the losing team, Bill?"

Shackelford stared at the man. The starkly incredible part of it all, he realized suddenly, was that Fitz-James wasn't kidding. It actually seemed quite logical to the giant that he should murder a man's wife and then drop in for a sociable chat. Shackelford repressed a shudder.

"Say what you have to say," he said.

Thomas Fitz-James leaned forward, smiling. "It's rather a long story," he apologized, "but I'm sure that it is one that you, as an anthropologist, will find interesting." He puffed slowly on his pipe, watching the blue smoke curl upward through the light. "It all began a long, long time ago . . "

In the very dawn of Man, lost in the gray mists of the Pleistocene, the evolving mammal that was to become *homo sapiens* was differentiated into two main branches. The first was the one familiar to all students of primate evolution, the one which climaxed in Cro-Magnon and so-called modern man.

The second was a very large strain, going back to Gigantopithecus and Maganthropus, and dividing conclusively with Pithecanthropus robustus. By the time of the second interglacial, there were two distinct species of man on the earth. One group, composed of Average men, lived in caves. The other group, composed of Advanced men, dwelt in the midst of a flourishing civilization.

The two groups were quite different, and in a very fundamental way. The size was important mainly as a convenient tag for differentiating between the two groups at a glance; the real difference lay in their relative effectiveness as cultural units. There was no real significant difference in the "intelligence" of the two kinds of men. The true differences between them could be traced to a single fact: the Advanced men had learned a lesson, learned it early and learned it well.

The only mutation involved had been a cultural one.

The Advanced men had learned the secret of cooperation.

It was painfully obvious, really, that the real key to evolution lay in the concept of cooperation and not in competition. It was not competition between men that enabled the species to survive; it was cooperation between men. One man alone was nothing. A society of men, working together, was invincible.

The Advanced men learned this early. They learned it, and they applied it. Naturally, as they pooled their resources within their group, they pulled ahead rapidly. The same snowballing effect that

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had so characterized the later development of the Average men exhibited itself to the Advanced group — five hundred thousand years earlier. They built a flourishing civilization, and they were not fools by any means. They looked out at their sub-human brothers smashing each other's heads with stone axes and they saw a golden opportunity — an opportunity to shape their own destiny through that of the animals in the caves.

And so, quite without their knowledge, they *domesticated* the other men.

Do the sheep in the field understand the social system which put them there? Does the ape born and reared in a zoo understand that he is not a free agent? How is he to judge, never having known anything else?

The other men, obviously, were of little use in their barbarous state. Therefore, the Advanced men helped them up the ladder. They were in no sense fiends; they *were* superior, and they realized that the progress of the Average men was necessary for their own development. They neither hated nor loved their brothers. How does the parasite feel toward his host?

The Advanced men kept in the background, although their cities and their physical appearance sifted down into legend. They knew what had put them in their present position, and they worshipped cooperation with clear-eyed devotion. They knew the cardinal law of social control: the group being controlled must not realize that they are not their own masters.

As the average men developed a civilization of their own, the Advanced men destroyed their own cities and infiltrated the communities of the other men. Inasmuch as they had charted its development themselves, they had no difficulty in securing and maintaining positions of dominance. They were the lords of the manors, the powers behind the thrones. They let the other men fight and work and build, and they skimmed the gravy off for themselves.

But they had built a Frankenstein.

There is one trouble with progress: it never follows the same path twice, and it never unfolds quite the way it is supposed to. It is easy to start a boulder rolling down the side of a mountain, but it is something else again to try to check it in midflight.

The Average men began to catch up. Once technology took hold in their society, it snowballed as it always did. Invention followed invention, development followed development. There was no basic difference in the intelligence of the two groups; one simply had a sizable head start.

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The Advanced men had to work to keep their superiority. They were very few in numbers, due to a culturally imposed breeding ban, and they began to worry. World War One had been an attempt on their part to smash the growing science of the other men, but it had backfired.

A menace arose from an unexpected source: archeology. So long as archeology had been the harmless pot-hunting pastime of a few eccentric antiquarians, it had been nothing, and no cause for alarm. But when scientific techniques had been introduced, when archeologists had turned their attention to an exhaustive reading of the record left in the earth, when they had begun to reconstruct the past . . .

The Advanced men had developed time travel in a hurry, and had altered the record so that it read what they wanted it to read. But time travel had proved tricky and difficult, and traces had remained — such as a plastic disc left in the dust of a centuries-dead Indian village.

They had altered the record, and they had done other things. They had tried to stop archeology. They had tried to stop it by ridiculing it, by cutting off its funds. They had worked subtly, planting questions. . . .

What good is it?

Why don't you spend that time doing something practical?

Why bother with all that precise data? What's a potsherd? Why not just dig for the fun of it?

They had planted men who would interpret the data in the way they wanted it interpreted. They had placed fascinating problems in the earth for the archeologists to play with — false problems. They had planted antagonism in fellow anthropologists, who tended to look with good-natured tolerance on their impractical compatriots. They had planted dogma: if you find something that you shouldn't find, cover it up again! Nobody will ever believe you!

They were good, these Advanced men. These same techniques were applied all through society, guiding it, directing it, holding it back.

But were they good enough?

The Average men were catching up, incredibly. The cattle were getting dangerous. Despite the best efforts of their masters, they were threatening to burst the bonds of earth entirely and flash outward to the stars. The Advanced men were inherently conservative, their very status and existence depending upon the maintenance of the status quo. And they were too few to follow their cattle to the stars.

"And so you see," Thomas Fitz-James concluded, tapping out his cold pipe in an ash-tray,

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"from my point of view you're something of a monster."

Shackelford looked at his watch. Three hours had gone by, and he had hardly moved. He took a deep breath.

"Why did you kill my wife?" he asked slowly.

Fitz-James spread his great, strong hands in a placating gesture. "For the same reason, Bill, that we launched the so-called flying saucers into the sky. Before I could tell you all this, I had to prove to you that we meant business, just as one day we will have to step in and show you that we already control the space around the earth. I imagine it has puzzled you?"

Shackelford stared at the giant. *It's only an intellectual puzzle to him*, he thought with sudden insight. *Dawn wasn't really human, not to him. . . .*

"Yes, it's puzzled me."

"Quite simple, really, Bill. Dawn was sick just before you left Mexico, remember? One night, an Erasure crew went back and left a window open by her bed, and put a few pills in her water. She died, of course. Unfortunately, this was rather a major undertaking, however, and it had curious consequences. It was necessary to rig things very carefully, so that no one but yourself saw the woman or talked to her between the time when she 'died' and the time she disappeared. On major changes such as this, the human mind often cannot quite adapt to it, and so you have two conflicting sets of memories, neither of them very clear. You wouldn't understand the details, of course, but perhaps it will give you some insight if you think back to your conversation with your friend Dr. Johnston." He smiled, enjoying the surprise on Shackelford's face. "Perhaps he asked about your wife?"

Shackelford thought back. He *did* seem to remember. . . .

"And you didn't answer him, of course. Didn't that strike you as peculiar at the time?"

"I don't know," Shackelford said, closing his eyes. "I don't know."

"Of *course* you don't, Bill. That's just the point. I feel that you are now in a position to appreciate what I am going to offer you."

"Offer?"

"Yes, Bill. Consider our position, if you can. We are not fiends; we do not kill for the fun of it. In fact, we abhor violence of any kind. Now, you have stumbled onto something that makes you potentially dangerous to us. I'll be quite candid with you: an Erasure in your case would be difficult. You have too many contacts; too many questions would be asked. Once in a while we must resort to such methods, but we prefer not to.

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These disappearances mount up; sooner or later we would paint a picture that all could read. We are at the moment toying with the idea of blasting your whole civilization back to barbarism, but for the moment we like things as they are. We are not unreasonable. You are rather a tall man, Bill."

Shackelford just sat there, in an unreal room, listening to an unreal giant. . . .

"All we ask of you," Fitz-James continued in his pleasant, well-modulated voice, as though he were discussing the weather, "is that you stick to the traditional theories in your teaching, that you discourage 'crackpot' research in your field, and refrain from it yourself. In other words, we are asking you to follow the path that will lead you to success in your profession. We are not ungrateful, you will find. We will help you; we will guarantee your success. And in time, with your height . . ."

Shackelford sighed, suddenly aware that he was very tired. "And if I don't?" he asked.

Fitz-James shrugged his huge shoulders. "Ridicule, Bill, and unhappiness. You will never get anywhere, and you will never do any good. It would be quite futile on your part to resist us, you see. We are immeasurably ahead of you technologically and socially; you cannot fight us with your puny weapons. You would simply wind up in an insane asylum if you tried to tell others what I've told you tonight, and you know it. We are not harming you, we are helping you. You have everything to lose and nothing to gain by opposing us. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes," said Shackelford. "Very clear."

Thomas Fitz-James got to his feet, towering over Shackelford. "I'll be going then, Bill. Thank you so much for the drinks, and feel free to drop in on me at any time." He extended his great hand. "Sorry about your wife, old man, but it was your fault."

Shackelford shook the big man's hand numbly and watched him go out the door. Then, for a long time, he simply stood there in the living room, unmoving.

"*Sorry about your wife, old man, but it was your fault.*"

Bill Shackelford walked back through the little hall and into the bedroom. He threw himself on the bed, not even bothering to take off his clothes. He was exhausted, physically and emotionally. His brain reeled and staggered and he felt sick again. He lay there in the darkness, in a world that was no longer his world, in a universe gone mad.

The empty bed next to him stabbed at his soul.

He closed his eyes, not caring whether or not he ever opened

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them again. His life was a chaos, a hideous joke. Out of all his past, all his learning, he knew only one thing with a terrible, icy certainty: he had looked upon the face of Evil.

VI

The little private universe in which we live is more, much more, than a mere random collection of people, buildings, villages and states. All of these things are tied together and made meaningful by the mental patterns, the culture sets, of the individual. We see what we have been trained to see.

For Bill Shackelford, the blinders had been taken off. He still saw the same things and did the same things, but they no longer meant what they were supposed to mean. He had never considered himself to be a naive man; he had, in fact, privately thought of himself as an emancipated, free thinker.

But he found that looking at the naked truth could be a jarring, heart-rending experience.

He stood in his office window and watched the students as they ebbed and flowed across the campus, responding to the steady pulls and thrusts of an artificial time system that bonged out the quarter hours on a bell. Some walked hurriedly, clutching their books, their eyes tired behind smudged glasses. Others moved reluctantly, debating whether or not to cut class and get a beer. Still others, couples, held hands and played the oldest games in the world. He watched and he thought: all of them, every single one of them, are moving in a maze not of their own construction. They are running a maze, and when they get through they will get their crumb of food — a job, in which they will work until they die, keeping a system going for a race they have never even heard of.

He walked along the streets of the city and watched the people hurrying, always hurrying — to get to work, to get home from work, to grab a cup of coffee, to have a little fun before the alarm rang again. Who were they working for?

He read the newspapers. In one corner of the world men were busily blowing each other to bits. In another people argued about whether the men *should* blow each other to bits or not. In another men spoke of freedom. Still elsewhere politicians rode eagerly about on trains, damning their opponents with gusto and offering charming wondrous panaceas for happiness. In a car by the side of the road two lovers talked about getting married and raising a family. At a scientific congress scientists soberly decided that overpopulation was the cause for war.

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Bill Shackelford was like the world he saw around him and he knew it. Outwardly he was "normal," doing his job. Inwardly he was being ripped apart by what he did and what he saw. He began to drink — not much, and not to excess, but enough to dull the edges of his perception. And even as he drank he thought: this, too, is part of the plan. This is what I'm supposed to do when I get mixed up, because it simply makes me ineffective and removes me as a vital factor in the total situation.

He went home at night to his home that was a home no longer. He sat in his living room with the lights out and his mind hurled its ceaseless, never-ending challenge at him: *what are you going to do about it!*

He fought out his battle alone. There were no bugles and drums, no flags, no medals, no pictures in the papers. He fought on a secret battleground, with his mind for a weapon. He fought in a world that spoke of war, but didn't know there was a war on.

What could he do?

He held on tight to a belief in what his work had meant to him. He held on to science as a tool in the search for truth. He did not worship it blindly — he simply felt that it was the only weapon in his arsenal that was good enough to work. He tackled his problem as objectively as possible.

Somehow, it never occurred to him to give up.

The first thing to do was to determine what he couldn't do — and he soon found that that included almost everything. He could not, obviously, write a letter to the *Times* about it, or buy time to go on the radio and explain the situation. He could just see himself running through the fantastic story and offering as proof his little plastic disc and the fact that his wife was dead.

That was the short, direct route to the padded ward.

He couldn't write a book. It would be read, certainly, but what good would it do? It would undoubtedly form the basis for a new cult of some sort, be cited as proof of Atlantis, and filed on the Occult shelf in the library. Quite possibly, too, it would result in his Erasure. *Erasure*, he thought wryly. A lovely, expressive term. When you see something on the blackboard you don't want there, just whish! and away it goes.

He couldn't organize an underground movement to work for liberation. It was a nice, romantic idea, but it was hogwash. The cardinal principle of warfare was not to underestimate the enemy. They would know of an underground movement before it got started, and that would be that. There was something charmingly

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innocent about the idea of a revolution, but it didn't appeal to Shackelford. Revolutions had a funny way of changing personnel and leaving the situation the same or worse.

It was too bad that life was not like fiction, he reflected. In fiction the good guys just got together and fought it out with the bad guys, and it was all beautifully simple and conclusive. One side utilized some damnably clever gimmick, and the other side gasped in despair and went down the drain. The hero and the heroine then gazed soulfully into each other's eyes and lived happily ever after — or at least until the next plot of the bad guys arose to be manfully thwarted. This wouldn't have been much of a story, Shackelford thought ruefully. He was a poor excuse for a hero, the heroine was dead, and there simply wasn't going to be any pat solution to it all. . . .

What is the solution to life? Shackelford knew that there wasn't any, not in the usual sense of the term. The really significant changes in the story of man had been relatively small things, unnoticed, for the most part, until long after they had changed the course of history for good and all. Small things — a fish that got caught in the mud and flopped desperately in a world without water trying to breathe. A little mammal that climbed into the trees and another one that came down out of the trees. A man who was nailed to a Cross as a heretic and another who took a trip on a boat and wrote a book about what he had seen. A man who wrote an equation about mass and energy, and another who listened to the grinding chaos of a city and wrote a symphony about it. . . .

Shackelford stared at the darkness. What could *he* do?

There was no answer.

Autumn had flashed its crimson colors and given way to the soot-gray of winter before Shackelford began to get an answer. He was sitting in the living room thinking about Dawn, when a slow question intruded itself on his mind.

Why had they had to kill her?

He got to his feet and lit a cigarette. They had killed her, obviously, because they wanted to warn him in a way that he would never forget. They had wanted to warn him because he was becoming dangerous. . . .

Dangerous.

"Damn," he said aloud.

He had been a fool. He had accepted what Fitz-James had told him at its face value — at the value which Fitz-James himself had put on it. He had accepted the myth of their invincibility, accepted the fact that they were somehow "superior." He had been told that he was helpless, and he had swallowed it.

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Why had he been told anything at all?

He thought back, carefully, over what Fitz-James had told him. That was data. What could he make of it?

I'm *dangerous* to them, he thought. *Why?*

He examined the self-styled Advanced men. What was the one cardinal fact of their history, the one overriding principle? *They had made a discovery very early, that of cooperation, and they had progressed a sum total of no distance since that time.* They had never even developed the concept of cooperation to its logical conclusion. It had never even occurred to them to cooperate on equal terms with other men, even when it was to their own ultimate advantage. The deal they had offered Shackelford was a handout, a master's reward to a good slave.

They were over-specialized. They had made a beautifully exact adjustment to an existing situation, and they had never changed it. They had developed techniques for enhancing their position, developed a wonderfully elaborate system for maintaining it, but they had never modified their basic adaptation even a particle. Their very existence depended upon a basic situation.

And now the situation was changing.

The Advanced men were so convinced of their own superiority they weren't bothering to meet the changing conditions. They knew they would come out on top; they always had. Shackelford suddenly realized that Fitz-James was undoubtedly more progressive than the others in his grasp of the problem, and even he had exhibited an amazing nonunderstanding of the men he was trying to control. He had murdered a man's wife and then extended his hand in tolerant friendship.

Shackelford poured himself a drink. Who was "superior?" What did the evidence show? *It showed that the men who had been dominated and driven and tricked had slowly closed the gap between the two groups. It showed that they were catching up despite the best efforts of the others to stop them.*

The Advanced men were too few to follow their cattle to the stars.

"We're winning," Shackelford said incredulously, loudly. "We're *winning.*"

Or were they? The jockeying for position that was taking place all around him in the world suddenly assumed new and vast significance. If the spirit of free inquiry could be maintained, if men could be taught to keep open minds and search for truth — they would win. If darkness closed again, if truth were tabooed, if a totalitarian state dictated what

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should and should not be done —

The lonely battle of the searcher for truth was, with startling clarity, all-important. The men in the laboratories, the men who probed into minds to see what made them tick, the solitary worker living with a forgotten tribe in Africa — they were fighting the battle for all of mankind.

If they won, then man would ultimately triumph over his masters and go on to a destiny of his own making. There would be chaos and violence beyond imagining, but man would one day triumph.

When the time was right —

If they could keep the spark of truth alive —

There were others who knew. There were others who realized that the time was premature — that they had the toughest, loneliest job in the world to do — a job that had to be done. . . .

"I'll deny everything I've said, Bill," the old man had said to him, so long ago. "I can't help you any further, and you'd be wasting your time to come back to me. You'll have to go your own way, as I went mine. You'll understand, before you're through. Just use your head, boy, just use your head, d'you see?"

Shackelford saw, at last. There was to be no glory in this fight, and no thanks. He didn't care. His wife had died, and it was up to him to make her death something a little more than meaningless. He didn't know, he couldn't be sure, about the outcome. Could men learn? Could they keep climbing?

He didn't know — but he had to try.

It was late in the semester before he had his answer.

It was a small thing, really, that told him what he had to know in order to go on living. It seemed, suddenly, that life was made up of small things, insignificant things, pushing and nudging and reacting in tiny darknesses where no one could see them. Small things made the difference: a plastic gear, a chance remark, a cell that functioned or died. All the big things, the sensational things, were simply the result of a mass of tiny reactions that could not be grasped and appreciated. . . .

Even the atomic bomb.

Shackelford was lecturing on theory to his freshman class. It was a large classroom, empty of personality, filled with a blur of faces and the scratch and scribble of fountain pens as the students took notes. It was a cold and gloomy winter day, just before the Christmas holidays, and it was stuffy and warm in the room. All the windows were closed against the winter chill, and little eddies of cigarette smoke curled up toward the ceiling and formed a bluish, unmoving cloud there, a murky miniature heaven.

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Shackelford talked, sitting on the edge of his desk, interested as always in his subject, but painfully aware of the fact that half of his class was mentally absent, despite the superficial bright eyes and intent postures.

"And so Morgan and the other early social evolutionists painted a charmingly simple and unreal picture of changing society," he said, watching the blue smoke and wishing that he had mastered the technique of smoking while lecturing. "They felt that all peoples passed through successive stages, from Savagery to Barbarism to Civilization. They failed to take such factors as diffusion into consideration, and later work has proved them wrong in almost every detail — as, for instance, the case of various nomadic herders who never went through an agricultural stage. Despite Leslie White, most anthropologists today don't take social evolution very seriously, and have turned for their answers to other concepts, such as those of Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown in England. . . ."

He paused, seeing a hand in the air. It belonged to — what was his name? — Barnes, that was it. "Yes, Mr. Barnes?" he said. "You had a question?"

"Yes, sir." The voice was apologetic, but determined. "I beg your pardon, but how do you *know* that social evolution did not take place? Just because you disprove one particular sequence, does that invalidate the whole idea? Please understand that I'm not questioning your authority, but how can you possibly *KNOW?*"

Shackelford stared at the boy — he was only a kid — so young and earnest on the second row. He felt a warm glow in his stomach, and his hand shook a little. He broke his own rule and lit a cigarette. He remembered that other Bill Shackelford, long ago in a faraway world of spring, interrupting a professor . . .

"*Pardon me, sir, but how do you KNOW?*"

He looked at the kid on the second row. A nice kid, he thought, a kid from a pleasant home, a kid "going to college." A kid cursed with a mind, but not knowing what that meant yet. A kid who might grow up and one day stand where Shackelford was standing now . . .

Bill Shackelford looked at him and thought: *One day you may face it too, boy. One day you may find out the score in this game we are playing. One day you may wake up as I did, to find your wife vanished from your side. One day you may have to fight your fight as I fought mine — and by then I pray that you will be ready to win. And what can I say to you now, boy, so young and not knowing*

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what you have to face? What can I offer you, one fighter to another, across a room that is ignorant of the battle around it? What can I say to you, that you may one day remember and know that you are not alone?

Shackelford said, "Your name is Barnes, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir." The voice was a little scared now. "Forrest Barnes."

"Well, Forrest," Shackelford said slowly, "you've just made an 'A' in this course, and I'd like to talk to you later. Your question is a good one, and I'm glad you asked it." Glad, he thought. What a pitiful word. "Don't ever take anything on authority — think it through for yourself. Don't ever stop asking questions, and remember, if you ever need a lift, that others are asking them too. You were dead right in your objection, and if you catch me up on anything else, just sing out. End of sermon — and thanks for your help."

He went on with his lecture then, conscious of the sub-murmurings of the rest of the class. What a screwball, they were thinking. Where does Barnes get off making an 'A' before the final? His old man must be on the Board of Regents.

But Shackelford watched Barnes' flushed and excited face, and he knew that what he had said had struck home. It was just a hot and stuffy classroom, but for Shackelford it was suddenly beautiful. He had found his answer. Could men learn, could they keep climbing? Was he a freak, or were there other men who would fight their way up to the truth?

Would man ever be free, free of the clay and free in the stars?

He knew now, at last and for always, that they would.

That evening, when Bill Shackelford walked through the evening across the cold campus, the weather was raw but he did not notice it. The cold wind blew and the mechanical city whined around the school, but there was a song in his heart.

Man would be free.

There were no flags, no cheering thousands, no triumphal music. But as he walked along, shoes clicking on the cold cement, toward his car and toward his empty home where a part of him had died, Bill Shackelford whistled a little tune into the teeth of the world.

. . THE Universe may be more like the untutored man's common-sense conception of it than had seemed possible a generation ago.

— J. H. Jeans

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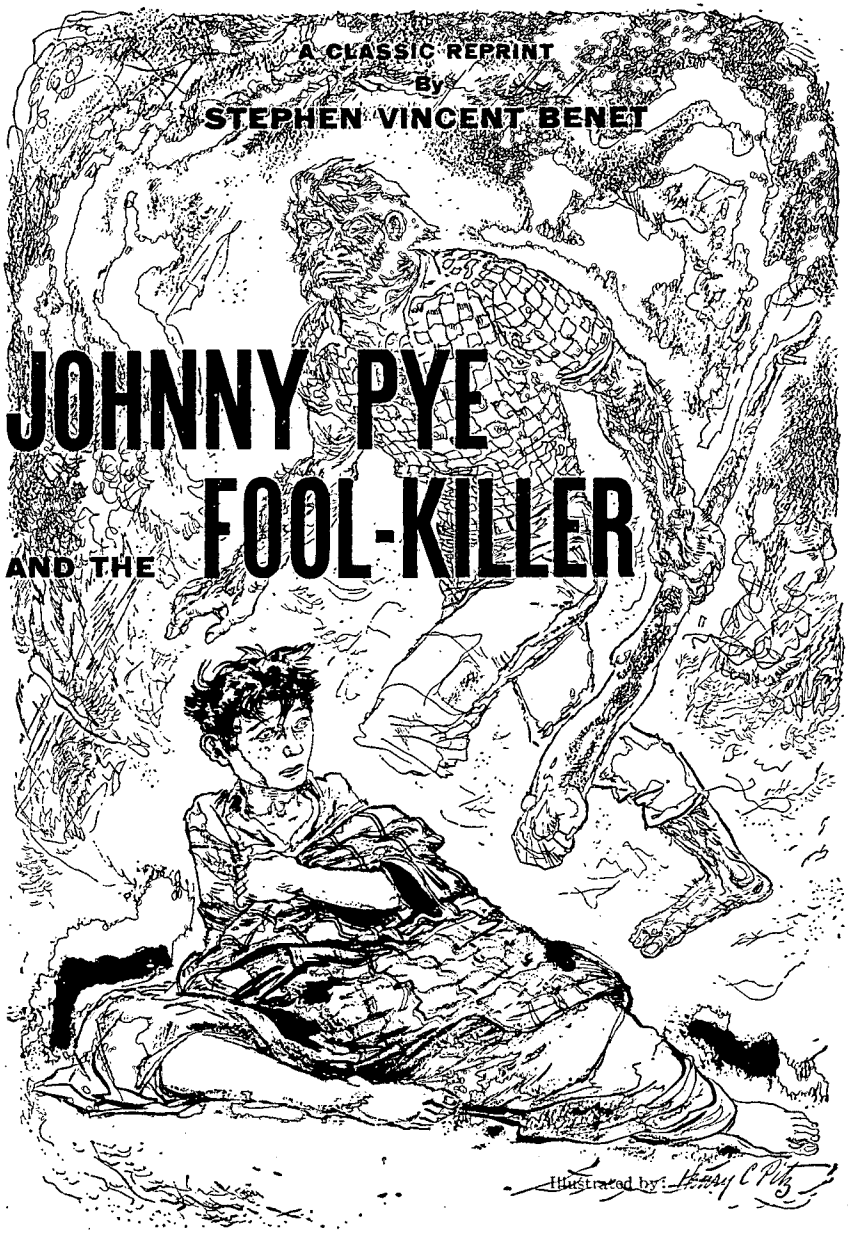
A CLASSIC REPRINT

By

STEPHEN VINCENT BENET

JOHNNY PYE AND THE FOOL-KILLER



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JOHNNY PYE AND THE FOOL-KILLER

Maybe you've never heard of the Fool-Killer. Or perhaps you have but don't believe in him. Well, in either case, here's the story of Johnny Pye and Fool-Killer.

In a lot of ways, Johnny wasn't what you'd call smart. He made a good many mistakes and sometimes he was a little slow to catch on. But one thing he found out at an early age and never forgot: the Fool-Killer had a big hickory club loaded with lead, and he'd use it on you if he ever got the chance.

Stephen Vincent Benet is the author. Good Enough?

You don't hear so much about the Fool-Killer these days, but when Johnny Pye was a boy there was a good deal of talk about him. Some said he was one kind of person, and some said another, but most people agreed that he came around fairly regular. Or, it seemed so to Johnny Pye. But then, Johnny was an adopted child, which is, maybe, why he took it so hard.

The miller and his wife had offered to raise him, after his own folks died, and that was a good deed on their part. But, as soon as he lost his baby teeth and started acting the way most boys act, they began to come down on him like thunder, which wasn't so good. They were good people according to their lights, but their lights were terribly strict ones, and they believed that the harder you were on a youngster, the better and brighter he got. Well,

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that may work with some children, but it didn't with Johnny Pye.

He was sharp and willing enough — as sharp and as willing as most boys in Martinsville. But, somehow or other, he never seemed to be able to do the right things or say the right words — at least when he was home. Treat a boy like a fool and he'll act like a fool, I say, but there's some folks need convincing. The miller and his wife thought the way to smarten Johnny was to treat him like a fool, and finally they got so he pretty much believed it himself.

And that was hard on him, for he had a boy's imagination, and maybe a little more than most. He could stand the beatings and he did. But what he couldn't stand was the way things went at the mill. I don't suppose the miller intended to do it. But, as long as Johnny Pye could remember, whenever he heard of the death of someone he didn't like, he'd say, "Well, the Fool-Killer's come for so-and-so," and sort of smack his lips. It was, as you might say, a family joke, but the miller was a big man, with a big red face, and it made a strong impression on Johnny Pye. Till, finally, he got a picture of the Fool-Killer himself. He was a big man, too, in a checked shirt and corduroy trousers, and he went walking the ways of the world, with a hickory club that had a lump of lead in the end of it. I don't know how Johnny Pye got that picture so clear, but, to him, it was just as plain as the face of any human being in Martinsville. And, now and then, just to test it, he'd ask a grown-up person, kind of timidly, if that was the way the Fool-Killer looked. And, of course, they'd generally laugh and tell him it was. Then Johnny would wake up at night, in his room over the mill, and listen for the Fool-Killer's step on the road and wonder when he was coming. But he was brave enough not to tell anybody that.

Finally, though, things got a little more than he could bear. He'd done some boy's trick or other — let the stones grind a little fine, maybe, when the miller wanted the meal ground coarse — just carelessness, you know. But he'd gotten whippings for it, one from the miller and one from his wife, and at the end of it, the miller had said, "Well, Johnny Pye, the Fool-Killer ought to be along for you most any day now. For I never did see a boy that was such a fool." Johnny looked to the miller's wife to see if she believed it, too, but she just shook her head and looked serious. So he went to bed that night, but he couldn't sleep, for every time a bough rustled or the mill wheel creaked it seemed to him it must be the Fool-Killer. And early next morning, before anyone was up,

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he packed such duds as he had in a bandana handkerchief and ran away.

He really didn't expect to get away from the Fool-Killer very long — as far as he knew, the Fool-Killer got you wherever you went. But he thought he'd give him a run for his money, at least. And when he got on the road, it was a bright spring morning, and the first peace and quiet he'd had in some time. So his spirits rose, and he chunked a stone at a bullfrog as he went along, just to show he was Johnny Pye and still doing business. He hadn't gone more than three or four miles out of Martinsville, when he heard a buggy coming up the road behind him. He knew the Fool-Killer didn't need a buggy to catch you, so he wasn't afraid of it, but he stepped to the side of the road to let it pass. But it stopped, instead, and a black-whiskered man with a stovepipe hat looked out of it.

"Hello, bub," he said. "Is this the road for East Liberty?"

"My name's John Pye and I'm eleven years old," said Johnny, polite, but firm, "and you take the next left fork for East Liberty. They say it's a pretty town — I've never been there myself." And he sighed a little, because he thought he'd like to see the world before the Fool-Killer caught up with him.

"H'm," said the man. "Stranger here, too, eh? And what brings a smart boy on the road so early in the morning?"

"Oh," said Johnny Pye, quite honestly, "I'm running away from the Fool-Killer. For the miller says I'm a fool and his wife says I'm a fool and almost everybody in Martinsville says I'm a fool except little Susie Marsh. And the miller says the Fool-Killer's after me — so I thought I'd run away before he came."

The black-whiskered man sat in his buggy and wheezed for a while. When he got his breath back, "Well, jump in, bub," he said. "The miller may say you're a fool, but I think you're a right smart boy to be running away from the Fool-Killer all by yourself. And I don't hold with small town prejudices, and I need a right smart boy, so I'll give you a lift on the road."

"But will I be safe from the Fool-Killer if I'm with you?" said Johnny. "For, otherwise, it don't signify."

"Safe?" said the black-whiskered man, and wheezed again. "Oh, you'll be safe as houses. You see, I'm a herb doctor — and, some folks think, a little in the Fool-Killer's line of business, myself. And I'll teach you a trade worth two of milling. So jump in, bub."

"Sounds alright the way you say it," said Johnny, "but my name's John Pye," and he jumped

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into the buggy. And they went rattling along toward East Liberty with the herb doctor talking and cutting jokes till Johnny thought he'd never met a pleasanter man. About half a mile from East Liberty, the doctor stopped at a spring.

"What are we stopping here for?" said Johnny Pye.

"Wait and see," said the doctor, and gave him a wink. Then he got a haircloth trunk full of empty bottles out of the back of the buggy and made Johnny fill them with spring water and label them. Then he added a pinch of pink powder to each bottle and shook them up and corked them and stowed them away.

"What's that?" said Johnny, very interested.

"That's Old Doctor Waldo's Unparalled Universal Remedy," said the doctor, reading from the label.

"Made from the purest snake oil and secret Indian herb, it cures rheumatism, blind staggers, headache, malaria, five kinds of fits and spots in front of the eyes. It will also remove oil or grease stains, clean knives and silver, polish brass, and is strongly recommended as a general tonic and blood purifier. Small size, one dollar — family bottle, two dollars and a half."

"But I don't see any snake oil in it," said Johnny, puzzled, "or any secret Indian herbs."

"That's because you're not a fool," said the doctor, with another wink. "The Fool-Killer wouldn't either. But most folks will."

And that very night, Johnny saw. For the doctor made his pitch in East Liberty and did it handsome. He took a couple of flaring oil torches and stuck them on the sides of the buggy; he put on a diamond stick-pin and did card tricks and told funny stories till he had the crowd goggle-eyed. As for Johnny, he let him play on the tambourine. Then he started talking about Doctor Waldo's Universal Remedy, and with Johnny to help him, the bottles went like hotcakes. Johnny helped the doctor count the money afterward, and it was a pile.

"Well," said Johnny, "I never saw money made easier. You've got a fine trade, Doctor."

"It's cleverness does it," said the doctor, and slapped him on the back.

"Now, a fool's content to stay in one place and do one thing, but the Fool-Killer never caught up with a good pitchman yet."

"Well, it's certainly lucky that I met up with you," said Johnny, "and if it's cleverness does it, I'll learn the trade or bust."

So he stayed with the doctor quite a while — in fact, till he could make up the remedy and do the card tricks almost as good

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as the doctor. And the doctor liked Johnny, for Johnny was a biddable boy. But one night they came into a town where things didn't go as they usually did. The crowd gathered as usual, and the doctor did his tricks. But, all the time, Johnny could see a sharp-faced little fellow going through the crowd and whispering to one man and another. Till, at last, right in the middle of the doctor's spiel, the sharp-faced fellow gave a shout of, "That's him all right! I'd know them whiskers anywhere!" and, with that, the crowd growled once and began to tear slats out of the nearest fence. Well, the next thing Johnny knew, he and the doctor were being ridden out of town on a rail, with the doctor's long coattails flying at every jounce.

They didn't hurt Johnny particular — him only being a boy. But they warned them both never to show their faces in that town again, and they heaved the doctor into a thistle patch and went their ways.

"Owoo!" said the doctor, "ouch!" as Johnny was helping him out of the thistle patch. "Go easy with those thistles! And why didn't you give me the office, you blame little fool."

"Office?" said Johnny. "What office?"

"When that sharp-nosed man started snooping around," said the doctor. "I thought that infernal main street looked familiar — I was through there two years ago, selling solid gold watches for a dollar apiece."

"But the works to a solid gold watch should be worth more than that," said Johnny.

"There weren't any works," said the doctor, with a groan, "but there was a nice lively beetle inside each case and it made the prettiest tick you ever heard."

"Well, that certainly was a clever idea," said Johnny. "I'd never had thought of that."

"Clever?" said the doctor. "Ouch — it was ruination! But who'd have thought the fools would bear a grudge for two years? And now we've lost the horse and buggy, too — not to speak of the bottles and the money. Well, there's lots more tricks to be played and we'll start again."

But, though he liked the doctor, Johnny began to feel dubious. For it occurred to him that if all the doctor's cleverness got him was being ridden out of town on a rail, he couldn't be as far away from the Fool-Killer as he thought. And, sure enough, as he was going to sleep that night, he seemed to hear the Fool-Killer's footsteps coming after him — step, step, step. He pulled his jacket up over his ears, but he couldn't shut it out. So, when the doctor had got in the way of starting business

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over again, he and Johnny parted company. The doctor didn't bear any grudge; he shook hands with Johnny and told him to remember that cleverness was power. And Johnny went on with his running away.

He got to a town, and there was a store with a sign in the window — BOY WANTED — so he went in. There, sure enough, was the merchant, sitting at his desk, and a fine, important man he looked, in his black broadcloth suit.

Johnny tried to tell him about the Fool-Killer, but the merchant wasn't interested in that. He just looked Johnny over, and saw that he looked biddable and strong for his age. "But, remember, no fooling around, boy!" said the merchant, sternly, after he hired him.

"No fooling around?" said Johnny, with the light of hope in his eyes.

"No," said the merchant, meaningly. "We've no room for fools in this business, I can tell you! You work hard, and you'll rise. But, if you've got any foolish notions, just knock them on the head and forget them."

Well, Johnny was glad enough to promise that, and he stayed with the merchant a year and a half. He swept out the store, and he put the shutters up and took them down; he ran errands and wrapped up packages, and learned to keep busy twelve hours a day. And, being a biddable boy and an honest one, he rose, just like the merchant said. The merchant raised his wages and let him begin to wait on customers and learn accounts. And then one night Johnny woke up in the middle of the night. And it seemed to him he heard, far away but getting nearer, the steps of the Fool-Killer after him — tramping, tramping.

He went to the merchant next day and said, "Sir, I'm sorry to tell you this, but I'll have to be moving on."

"Well, I'm sorry to hear that, Johnny," said the merchant, "for you've been a good boy. And, if it's a question of salary —"

"It isn't that," said Johnny, "but tell me one thing, sir, if you don't mind my asking. Supposing I did stay with you — where would I end?"

The merchant smiled. "That's a hard question to answer," he said, "and I'm not much given to compliments. But I started, myself, as a boy, sweeping out the store. And you're a bright youngster with lots of go-ahead. I don't see why, if you stuck to it, you shouldn't make the same kind of success that I have."

"And what's that?" said Johnny.

The merchant began to look irritated, but he kept his smile.

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"Well," he said, "I'm not a boastful man, but I'll tell you this. Ten years ago, I was the richest man in town. Five years ago, I was the richest man in the county. And, five years from now — well, I aim to be the richest man in the state."

His eyes kind of glittered as he said it, but Johnny was looking at his face. It was sallow-skinned and pouchy, with the jaw as hard as a rock. And it came upon Johnny that moment that, though he'd known the merchant a year and a half, he'd never really seen him enjoy himself except when he was driving a bargain.

"Sorry, sir," he said, "but, if it's like that, I'll certainly have to go. Because, you see, I'm running away from the Fool-Killer, and if I stayed here and got to be like you, he'll certainly catch up with me in no —"

"Why, you impertinent young cub!" roared the merchant, with his face gone red all of a sudden. "Get your money from the cashier!" and Johnny was on the road before you could say "Jack Robinson." But, this time, he was used to it, and walked off whistling.

Well, after that, he hired out to quite a few different people, but I won't go into all of his adventures. He worked for an inventor for a while, and they split up because Johnny happened to ask him what would be the good of his patent, self-winding, perpetual-motion machine, once he did get it invented. And, while the inventor talked big about improving the human race, and the beauties of science, it was plain he didn't know. So that night Johnny heard the steps of the Fool-Killer, far off but coming closer, and, next morning, he went away. Then he stayed with a minister for a while, and he certainly hated to leave him, for the minister was a good man. But they got to talking one evening and, as it chanced, Johnny asked him what happened to people that didn't believe in his particular religion. Well, the minister was broad-minded, but there's only one answer to that. He admitted they might be good folks — he even admitted they mightn't exactly go to hell — but he couldn't let them into heaven, no, not the best and wisest of them, for there were specifications laid down by creed and church, and, if you didn't fulfill them, you didn't.

So, Johnny had to leave him, and, after that, he went with an old drunken fiddler for a while. He wasn't a good man, I guess, but he could play till the tears ran down your cheeks. And, when he was playing his best, it seemed to Johnny that the Fool-Killer was very far away. For, in spite of his faults and his weaknesses, while he played there was might

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in the man. But he died drunk in a ditch one night, with Johnny to hold his head, and, while he left Johnny his fiddle, it didn't do Johnny much good. For, while Johnny could play a tune, he couldn't play like the fiddler — it wasn't in his fingers.

Then it chanced that Johnny took up with a company of soldiers. He was still too young to enlist, but they made a kind of pet of him and everything went swimmingly for a while. For the Captain was the bravest man Johnny had ever seen, and he had an answer for everything, out of regulations and the Articles of War. But then they went West to fight Indians and the same old trouble cropped up again. For one night the Captain said to him, "Johnny, we're going to fight the enemy tomorrow, but you'll stay in camp."

"Oh, I don't want to do that," said Johnny. "I want to be in on the fighting."

"It's an order," said the captain grimly. Then he gave Johnny certain instructions and a letter to take to his wife.

"For the colonel's a copper-plated fool," he said, "and we're walking straight into an ambush."

"Why don't you tell him that?" said Johnny.

"I have," said the captain, "but he's the colonel."

"Colonel or no colonel," said Johnny, sharply "if he's a fool, somebody ought to stop him."

"You can't do that in an army," said the captain. "Orders are orders." But it turned out the captain was wrong about it, for, the next day, before they could get moving, the Indians attacked and got badly licked. When it was all over, "Well, it was a good fight," said the captain professionally. "All the same, if they waited, and laid in ambush, they'd have had our hair. But, as it was, they didn't stand a chance."

"But why didn't they lay in ambush?" said Johnny.

"Well," said the captain, "I guess they had their orders, too. And now, how would you like to be a soldier?"

"Well, it's a nice outdoors life, but I'd like to think it over," said Johnny. For he knew the captain was brave and the Indians had been brave — you couldn't find two braver sets of people. But, all the same, when he thought the whole thing over, he seemed to hear steps in the sky. So he soldiered to the end of the campaign and then he left the army, though the captain told him he was making a mistake.

By now, of course, he wasn't a boy any longer; he was getting to be a young man with a young man's thoughts and feelings. And, half the time, nowadays, he'd forget about the Fool-Killer, except as a dream he'd had when

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he was a boy. He could even laugh at it now and then, and think what a fool he'd been to believe there was such a man.

But, all the same, the desire in him wasn't satisfied, and something kept driving him on. He'd have called it ambitiousness, now, but it came to the same thing. And with every new trade he tried, sooner or later would come the dream — the dream of the big man in the checked shirt and corduroy pants, walking the ways of the world with his hickory stick in one hand. It made him angry to have that dream, now, but it had a singular power over him. Till, finally, when he was turned twenty or so, he got scared.

"Fool-Killer or no Fool-Killer," he said to himself, "I've got to ravel this matter out. For there must be one thing a man could tie to, and be sure he wasn't a fool. I've tried cleverness and money and half a dozen other things, and they don't seem to be the answer. So now I'll try book learning and see what comes of that."

So he read all the books he could find, and whenever he'd seem to hear the steps of the Fool-Killer, coming for the authors — and that was frequent — he'd try and shut his ears. But some books said one thing was best and some another, and he couldn't rightly decide.

"Well," he said to himself, when he'd read and read till his head felt as stuffed with book learning as a sausage with meat, "it's interesting, but it isn't exactly contemporaneous. So I think I'll go down to Washington and ask the wise men there. For it must take a lot of wisdom to run a country like the United States, and if there's people who can answer my questions, it's there they ought to be found."

So he packed his bag and off to Washington he went. He was modest for a youngster, and he didn't intend to try to see the President right away. He thought probably a congressman was about his size. So he saw a congressman, and the congressman told him the thing to be was an upstanding young American and vote the Republican ticket — which sounded alright to Johnny Pye, but not exactly what he was after.

Then he went to a senator, and the senator told him to be an upstanding young American, and vote the Democratic ticket — which sounded alright, too, but not what he was after either. And, somehow, though both men had been impressive and affable, right in the middle of their speeches he'd seem to hear steps — you know.

But a man has to eat, whatever else he does, and Johnny found he'd better buckle down and get himself a job. It happened to be the first congressman he struck,

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for that one came from Martinsville, which is why Johnny went to him in the first place. And, in a little while, he forgot his search entirely and the Fool-Killer, too, for the congressman's niece came East to visit him, and she was the Susie Marsh that Johnny had sat next to in school. She'd been pretty then, but she was prettier now, and as soon as Johnny Pye saw her, his heart gave a jump and a thump.

"And don't think we don't remember you in Martinsville, Johnny Pye," she said, when her uncle had explained who his new clerk was. "Why, the whole town'll be excited when I write home. We've heard all about your killing Indians and inventing perpetual motion and traveling around the country with a famous doctor and making a fortune in dry goods and — oh, it's a wonderful story!"

"Well," said Johnny, and coughed. "Some of that's a little bit exaggerated. But it's nice of you to be interested. So they don't think I'm a fool anymore in Martinsville?"

"I never thought you were a fool," said Susie with a little smile, and Johnny felt his heart give another bump.

"And I always knew you were pretty, but never how pretty til now," said Johnny, and coughed again. "But speaking of old times, how's the miller and his wife? For I did leave them right sudden, and while there were faults on both sides, I must've been a trial to them too."

"They've gone the way of all flesh," said Susie Marsh, "and there's a new miller there now. But he isn't very well-liked, to tell the truth, and he's letting the mill run down."

"That's a pity," said Johnny, "for it was a likely mill." Then he began to ask her more questions and she began to remember things, too. Well, you know how the time can go when two youngsters get talking like that.

Johnny Pye never worked so hard in his whole life as he did that winter. And it wasn't that Fool-Killer he thought about — it was Susie Marsh. First he thought she loved him and then he was sure she didn't, and then he was betwixt and between, and all perplexed and confused. But, finally, it turned out alright and he had her promise, and Johnny Pye knew he was the happiest man in the world. And that night he waked up in the night, and heard the Fool-Killer coming after him — step, step, step.

He didn't sleep much after that, and came down to breakfast hollow-eyed. But his uncle-to-be didn't notice that — he was rubbing his hands and smiling.

"Put on your best necktie, Johnny!" he said, very cheerful,

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"for I've got an appointment with the President today, and, just to show I approve of my niece's fiance, I'm taking you along."

"The President!" said Johnny, all dumbfounded.

"Yes," said Congressman Marsh. "You see, there's a little bill — well, we needn't go into that. But slick down your back hair, Johnny — we'll make Martinsville proud of us this day!"

Then a weight seemed to go from Johnny's shoulders and a load from his heart. He wrung Mr. Marsh's hand.

"Thank you, Uncle Eben!" he said. "I can't thank you enough." For, at last, he knew he was going to look upon a man that was bound to be safe from the Fool-Killer — and it seemed to him if he could just once do that, all his searchings would be ended.

Well, it doesn't signify which president it was — you can take it from me that he was President, and a fine looking man. He'd just been elected, too, so he was lively as a trout, and the saddle galls he'd get from the Congress hadn't even begun to show. Anyhow, there he was, and Johnny feasted his eyes on him. For if there was anybody in the country the Fool-Killer couldn't bother, it must be a man like this.

The President and the congressman talked politics for a while, and then it was Johnny's turn.

"Well, young man," said the President, affably, "and what can I do for you — for you look to me like a fine, upstanding young American."

The congressman cut in quick before Johnny could open his mouth.

"Just a word of advice, Mr. President," he said. "Just a word in season. For my young friend's led an adventurous life, but now he's going to marry my niece and settle down. And what he needs most is a word of ripe wisdom from you."

"Well," said the President, looking at Johnny rather keenly, "if that's all he needs, a short horse is soon curried. I wish most of my callers wanted as little."

But all the same, he drew Johnny out — as such men can — and before Johnny knew it he was telling his life story.

"Well," said the President, looking at Johnny rather keenly. "Been a rolling stone, young man. But there's nothing wrong in that. And, for one of your varied experience, there's one obvious career. Politics!" he said, and slapped his fist on his hand.

"Well," said Johnny, scratching his head, "of course, since I've been in Washington, I've thought of that. But I don't know that I'm rightly fitted."

"You can write a speech," said Congressman Marsh, quite thoughtful, "for you've helped

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me with mine. You're a likeable fellow, too. And you were born poor and worked up — and you've even got a war record — why hell! Excuse me, Mr. President! — he's worth five hundred votes as he stands!"

"I — I'm more than honored by you two gentlemen," said Johnny, abashed and flattered, "but supposing I did go into politics — where would I end up?"

The President looked sort of modest.

"The Presidency of the United States," he said, "is within the legitimate ambition of every American citizen. Provided he can get elected, of course."

"Oh," said Johnny, feeling dazzled, "I never thought of that. Well, that's a great thing. But it must be a great responsibility, too."

"It is," said the President, looking just like his pictures on the campaign buttons.

"Why, it must be an awful responsibility!" said Johnny. "I can't hardly see how a mortal man can bear it. Tell me, Mr. President," he said, "may I ask you a question?"

"Certainly," said the President, looking prouder and more responsible and more and more like his picture on the campaign buttons every minute.

"Well," said Johnny, "it sounds like a fool question, but it's this: this is a great big country of ours, Mr. President, and it's got the most amazing lot of different people in it. How can any President satisfy all those people at one time? Can you yourself, Mr. President?"

The President looked a bit taken aback for a minute. But then he gave Johnny Pye a statesman's glance.

"With the help of God," he said solemnly, "and in accordance with the principles of our great party, I intend . . ."

But Johnny didn't even hear the end of the sentence. For, even as the President was speaking, he heard a step outside the corridor and he knew, somehow, it wasn't the step of a secretary or a guard. He was glad the President had said "with the help of God" for that sort of softened the step. And when the President finished, Johnny bowed.

"Thank you, Mr. President," he said, "that's what I wanted to know. And now I'll go back to Martinsville, I guess."

"Go back to Martinsville?" said the President, surprised.

"Yes, sir," said Johnny. "For I don't think I'm cut out for politics."

"And that is all you have to say to the President of the United States?" said his uncle-to-be, in a fume.

But the President had been

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thinking, meanwhile, and he was a bigger man than the congressman.

"Wait a minute, Congressman," he said. "This young man's honest, at least, and I like his looks. Moreover, of all the people who've come to see me in the last six months, he's the only one who hasn't wanted something — except the White House cat, and I guess she wanted something, too, because she meowed. You don't want to be President, young man, and frankly, I don't blame you. But, how would you like to be postmaster at Martinsville?"

"Postmaster at Martinsville?" said Johnny. "But —"

"Oh, it's only a tenth-class post-office," said the President, "but, for once in my life, I'll do something because I want to, and let Congress yell it's head off. Come — is it yes or no?"

Johnny thought of all the places he'd been, and all the trades he'd worked at. He thought, queerly enough, of the old drunk fiddler dead in the ditch, but he knew he couldn't be that. Mostly, though, he thought of Martinsville and Susie Marsh. And though he'd just heard the steps of the Fool-Killer, he defied the Fool-Killer.

"Why, it's yes, of course, Mr. President," he said, "for then I can marry Susie."

"That's as good a reason as you'll find," said the President. "And now I'll just write a note."

Well, he was as good as his word, and Johnny and his Susie were married and went back to Martinsville to live. And, as soon as Johnny learned the ways of postmastering, he found it as good a trade as most. There wasn't much mail in Martinsville, but, in between whiles, he ran the mill, and that was a good trade too. And all the time he knew, at the back of his mind, that he hadn't settled accounts with the Fool-Killer. But he didn't care much about that, for he and Susie were happy. And after a while they had a child, and that was the most remarkable experience that had ever happened to any young couple, though the doctor said it was a perfectly normal baby.

One evening, when his son was about a year old, Johnny Pye took the river road going home. It was a mite longer than the hill road, but it was the cool of the evening, and there's times when a man likes to walk by himself, fond as he may be of his wife and family.

He was thinking of the way things had turned out for him, and they seemed to him pretty astonishing and singular, as they do to most folks, when you think them over. In fact, he was thinking so hard that, before he knew it, he'd almost stumbled over an old scissors grinder who'd set up his grindstone and tools by the side of the road. The scissors

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grinder had his cart with him, but he'd turned the horse out to graze — and a lank, old, white horse it was, with every rib showing. And he was very busy, putting an edge on a scythe.

"Oh, sorry," said Johnny Pye. "I didn't know anybody was camping here. But you might come around to my house tomorrow — my wife's got some knives that need sharpening."

Then he stopped, for the old man gave him a long, keen look.

"Why, it's you Johnny Pye," said the man. "And how do you do, Johnny Pye! You've been a long time coming — in fact, now and then, I thought I'd have to fetch you. But you're here at last."

Johnny Pye was a grown man now, but he began to tremble.

"But it isn't you!" he said, wildly. "I mean, you're not him! Why, I've known how he looks all my life. He's a big man, with a checked shirt, and he carries a hickory stick with a lump of lead in one end."

"Oh, no," said the scissors grinder, quite quiet. "You may have thought of me that way, but that's not the way I am." And Johnny Pye heard the scythe go whet-whet-whet on the stone. The old man ran some water on it, and looked at the edge. Then he shook his head as if the edge didn't quite satisfy him. "Well, Johnny, are you ready?" he said after what seemed quite a while.

"Ready?" said Johnny in a hoarse voice. "Of course I'm not ready."

"That's what they all say," said the old man, nodding his head, and the scythe went whet-whet on the stone.

Johnny wiped his brow, and started to argue it out.

"You see, if you'd found me earlier," he said, "or later. I don't want to be unreasonable, but I've got a wife and child."

"Most has wives and many has children," said the old man, grimly, and the scythe went whet-whet on the stone as he pushed the treadle. And a shower of sparks flew, very clear and bright, for the night had begun to fall.

"Oh, stop that damn racket, and let a man think for a minute!" said Johnny, desperate. "I can't go, I tell you. I won't. It isn't time. It's —"

The old man stopped the grindstone and pointed with the scythe at Johnny Pye.

"Tell me one good reason," he said. "There's men would be missed in the world, but are you one of them? A clever man might be missed, but are you a clever man?"

"No," said Johnny, thinking of the herb doctor. "I had a chance to be clever, but I gave it up."

"One," said the old man, ticking off on his fingers. "Well, a

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rich man might be missed — by some. But you aren't rich, I take it."

"No," said Johnny, thinking of the merchant, "nor wanted to be."

"Two," said the old man. "Cleverness, and riches — they're done. But there's still martial bravery and being a hero. There might be a chance to make it, if you were one of those."

Johnny Pye shuddered a little, remembering the way that the battle-field looked, out West, when the Indians were dead and the fight over.

"No," he said, "I've fought, but I'm not a hero."

"Well, then, there's religion," said the old man, sort of patient, "and science, and — but what's the use? We know what you did with those. I might feel a trifle of compunction if I had to deal with a President of the United States. But —"

"Oh, you know well enough I ain't President," said Johnny, with a groan. "Can't you get it over with and be done?"

"You're not putting up a very good case," said the old man, shaking his head. "I'm surprised at you, Johnny. Here you spend your youth running away from being a fool. And yet, what's the first thing you do when you're a man grown? Why, you marry a girl, settle down in your home town, and start raising children when you don't know how they'll turn out. You might've known I'd catch up with you then — you just put yourself in my way."

"Fool I may be," said Johnny Pye in his agony, "and if you take it like that, I guess we're all fools. But Susie's my wife, and my child's my child. And, as for work in the world — well, somebody has to be postmaster, or folks wouldn't get the mail."

"Would it matter much if they didn't?" said the old man, pointing his scythe.

"Well, no, I don't suppose it would, considering what's on the post cards," said Johnny Pye. "But while it's my business to sort it, I'll sort it as well as I can."

The old man whetted his scythe so long that a long shower of sparks flew out on the grass.

"Well," he said, "I've got my job, too, and I do it likewise. But I'll tell you what I'll do. You're coming my way, no doubt of it, but looking you over, you don't look quite ripe yet. So I'll let you off for a while. For that matter," said he, "if you'll answer one question of mine — how a man can be a human being and not be a fool — I'll let you off permanent. It'll be the first time in history," he said, "but you've got to do something on your own hook, once in a while. And now you can walk along, Johnny Pye."

With that he ground the scythe till the sparks flew out like comets

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and Johnny Pye walked along. The air of the meadow had never seemed so sweet to him before.

All the same, even with his relief, he didn't quite forget, and sometimes Susie had to tell the children not to disturb father because he was thinking. But time went ahead, as it does, and pretty soon Johnny Pye found that he was forty. He never expected to be forty, when he was young, and it kind of surprised him. But there it was, though he couldn't say he felt much different, except now and then, when he stooped over. And he was a solid citizen of the town, well-liked and well-respected, with a growing family and a stake in the community, and when he thought those things over, they kind of surprised him, too. But, pretty soon, it was as if things had always been that way.

It was after his eldest son had been drowned out fishing that Johnny Pye met the scissors grinder again. But this time he was bitter and distracted, and, if he could have got to the old man, he'd have done him a mortal harm. But, somehow or other, when he tried to come to grips with him, it was like reaching for air and mist. He could see the sparks fly from the ground scythe, but he couldn't even touch the wheel.

"You coward!" said Johnny Pye. "Stand up and fight like a man!" But the old man just nodded his head and the wheel kept grinding and grinding.

"Why couldn't you have taken me?" said Johnny Pye, as if those words had never been said before. "What's the sense in all this? Why can't you take me now?"

Then he tried to wrench the scythe from the old man's hands, but he couldn't touch it. And then he fell down and lay on the grass for a while.

"Time passes," said the old man, nodding his head. "Time passes."

"It will never cure the grief I have for my son," said Johnny Pye.

"It will not," said the old man, nodding his head. "But time passes. Would you leave your wife a widow and your children fatherless for the sake of your grief?"

"No, God help me!" said Johnny Pye. "That wouldn't be right for a man."

"Then go home to your house, Johnny Pye," said the old man. And Johnny Pye went, but there were lines in his face that hadn't been there before.

And the time passed, like the flow of the river, and Johnny Pye's children married and had houses and children of their own. And Susie's hair grew white, and her back grew bent, and when Johnny Pye and his children followed her to her grave, folks said

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she died in the fullness of years, but that was hard for Johnny Pye to believe. Only folks didn't talk as plain as they used to, and the sun didn't heat as much, and sometimes, before dinner, he'd go to sleep in his chair.

And once, after Susie had died, the President of those days came through Martinsville and Johnny Pye shook hands with him and there was a piece in the paper about his shaking hands with two Presidents, fifty years apart. Johnny Pye cut out the clipping and kept it in his pocketbook. He liked this President alright, but, as he told people, he wasn't a patch on the other one fifty years ago. Well, you couldn't expect it — you didn't have Presidents these days, not to call them Presidents. All the same, he took a lot of satisfaction in the clipping.

He didn't get down to the river road much anymore — it wasn't too long a walk, of course, but he just didn't often feel like it. But, one day, he slipped away from the granddaughter that was taking care of him, and went. It was kind of a steep road, really, he didn't remember its being so steep.

"Well," said the scissors grinder, "and good afternoon to you, Johnny Pye."

"You'll have to talk a little louder," said Johnny Pye. "My hearing's perfect, but folks don't speak as plain as they used to. Stranger in town?"

"Oh, so that's the way it is," said the scissors grinder.

"Yes, that's the way it is," said Johnny Pye. He knew he ought to be afraid of this fellow, now he'd put on his spectacles and got a good look at him, but for the life of him, he couldn't remember why.

"I know just who you are," he said a little fretfully. "Never forgot a face in my life, and your name's right on the tip of my tongue —"

"Oh, don't bother about names," said the scissors grinder. "We're old acquaintances. And I asked you a question years ago — do you remember that?"

"Yes," said Johnny Pye, "I remember." Then he began to laugh — a high, old man's laugh. "And of all the fool questions I was ever asked, that certainly took the cake."

"Oh?" said the scissors grinder.

"Uh-huh," said Johnny Pye. "For you asked how a man could be a human being and yet not be a fool. And the answer is — when he's dead and gone and buried. Any fool would know that."

"That so?" said the scissors grinder.

"Of course," said Johnny Pye. "I ought to know. I'll be ninety-two next November, and I've shook hands with two Presidents. The first President I shook —"

"I'll be interested to hear about that," said the scissors

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grinder, "but we've got a little business first. For if all human beings are fools, how does the world get ahead?"

"Oh, there's lots of other things," said Johnny Pye, kind of impatient. "There's the brave and the wise and the clever — and they're apt to roll it ahead as much as an inch. But it's all mixed in together. For, Lord, it's only some kind of fool creature that would have crawled out of the sea to dry land in the first place — or got dropped from the garden of Eden, if you like it better that way. You can't depend on the kind of people folks think they are — you've got to go by what they do. And I wouldn't give much for a man that some folks didn't think was a fool, in his time."

"Well," said the scissors grinder, "you've answered my question — at least as well as you could, which is all you can expect of a man. So, I'll keep my part of the bargain."

"And what was that?" said Johnny. "For while it's all straight in my head, I don't quite recollect the details."

"Why," said the scissors grinder rather testy, "I'm to let you go, you old fool! You'll never see me again until the Last Judgment. There'll be trouble in the office about it," said he, "but you've got to do what you like, once in a while."

"Phew!" said Johnny Pye. "That needs thinking over!" And he scratched his head.

"Why?" said the scissors grinder, a bit affronted. "It ain't often I can offer a man eternal life."

"Well," said Johnny Pye, "I take it very kind, but, you see, it's this way." He thought for a moment. "No," he said, "you wouldn't understand. You can't have touched seventy yet, by your looks, and no young man would."

"Try me," said the scissors grinder.

"Well," said Johnny Pye, "it's this way," and he scratched his head again. "I'm not saying — if you'd made the offer forty years ago, or even twenty. But, well, now, let's just take one detail. Let's say 'teeth'."

"Well, of course," said the scissors grinder, "naturally — I mean you could hardly expect me to do anything about that."

"I thought so," said Johnny Pye. "Well, you see, these are good bought teeth, but I'm sort of tired of hearing them click. And spectacles, I suppose, the same?"

"I'm afraid so," said the scissors grinder. "I can't interfere with time, you know — that's not my department. And, frankly, you couldn't expect, at a hundred and eighty, let's say, to be quite the man you were at ninety. But still, you'd be a wonder!"

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"Maybe so," said Johnny Pye, "but, you see — well, the truth is, I'm an old man now. You wouldn't think it to look at me, but it's so. And my friends — well, they're gone — and Susie and the boy — and somehow you don't get as close to the younger people, except the children. And to keep on just going and going till Judgment Day, with nobody around to talk to that had real horse sense — well, no, sir, it's a handsome offer but I just don't feel up to accepting. It may not be patriotic of me, and I feel sorry for Martinsville. It'd do wonders for the climate and the chamber of commerce, to have a leading citizen live till Judgment Day. But a man's got to do as he likes, at least once in his life." He stopped and looked at the scissors grinder. "I'll admit, I'd kind of like to beat out Ike Leavis," he said. "To hear him talk, you'd think nobody had ever pushed ninety before."

"We can't issue a limited policy."

"Well," said Johnny Pye. "I just thought of it. And Ike's alright." He waited a moment. "Tell me," he said in a low voice. "Well, you know what I mean. Afterwards. I mean, if you're likely to see" — he coughed — "your friends again. I mean, if it's so — like some folks believe."

"I can't tell you that," said the other. "I only go so far."

"Well, there's no harm in asking," said Johnny Pye, rather humbly. He peered into the darkness; a last shower of sparks flew from the scythe.

"H'm," said Johnny Pye, testing the edge. "That's a well-ground scythe. But they used to grind 'em better in the old days." He listened and looked for a moment anxiously. "Oh, Lordy," he said, "there's Helen come to take me back to the house."

"Not this time," said the scissors grinder. "Yes, there isn't bad steel in that scythe. Well, let's go, Johnny Pye."

Room With A View

(*Continued from page 94*)

down the grog. "Hurry and we'll make her. Faster. Faster."

Beautiful girls, long dark hair, dancing on the beach. Clumping outside, cabbage smells, drawing near, crawling toward him . . .

"Give her all she's got, Mr. Engineer," he hollered down the bottle neck. "Full speed ahead!"

Louder came the clumping, mutterings outside his cabin door. Bosco downed the last of the liquid and took off his clothes.

A pounding began on the door. "Blossom. I'm coming in!"

"What do I care?", Bosco shouted. "I can make it now!"

And as she battered down his cabin door, Bosco dove from the porthole into the deep dark sea.

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SALLY

(Continued from page 50)

drop. Gellhorn had been a criminal. His treatment of the bus had been brutal. There was no question in my mind he deserved death. But still I felt a bit queasy over the manner of it.

A month has passed now and I can't get it out of my mind.

My cars talk to one another. I have no doubt about it anymore. It's as though they've gained confidence; as though they're not bothering to keep it secret anymore. Their engines rattle and knock continuously.

And they don't talk among themselves only. They talk to the cars and buses that come into the Farm on business. How long have they been doing that?

They must be understood, too. Gellhorn's bus understood them, for all it hadn't been on the grounds more than an hour. I can close my eyes and bring back that dash along the highway, with our cars flanking the bus on either side, clacking their motors at it till it understood, stopped, let me out, and ran off with Gellhorn.

Did my cars tell him to kill Gellhorn? Or was that his idea?

Can cars have such ideas? The motor designers say no. But they mean under ordinary conditions. Have they foreseen *everything?*

Cars get ill-used, you know.

Some of them enter the Farm and observe. They get told things. They find out that cars exist whose motors are never stopped, whom no one ever drives, whose every need is supplied.

Then maybe they go out and tell others. Maybe the word is spreading quickly. Maybe they're going to think that the Farm way should be the way all over the world. They don't understand. You couldn't expect them to understand about legacies and the whims of rich men.

There are millions of automatobiles on Earth, tens of millions. If the thought gets rooted in them that they're slaves; that they should do something about it. . . . If they begin to think the way Gellhorn's bus did . . .

Maybe it won't be till after my time. And then they'll have to keep a few of us to take care of them, won't they? They wouldn't kill us all.

And maybe they would. Maybe they wouldn't understand about how someone would have to care for them. Maybe they won't wait.

Every morning I wake up and think, Maybe today. . . .

I don't get as much pleasure out of my cars as I used to. Lately, I notice that I'm even beginning to avoid Sally.

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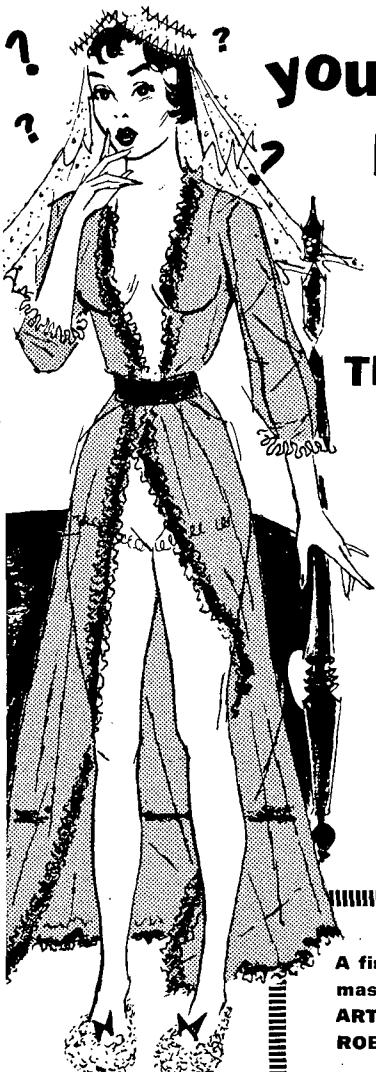

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